

THE VULTURES

T.V. REDDY

185



THE VULTURES

(A Novel based on the Rural life in Andhra Pradesh)

T. Vasudeva Reddy

Golden Books of India (Publications)

32/1, Chandi Ghosh Road
Calcutta-700 040

**Published by
Gouranga Sarker
on behalf of
Golden Books of India (Publications)
Calcutta-40**

Rs. 30'00

Cover : Bibhuti Sengupta

**Printed at
Karmayoga Ashram Press
121, New Tollygunj
24-Parganas
Pin—743509**

A FOREWORD

Being born and bred in a remote village in Andhra it has been my long-cherished ambition to attempt a novel that is a real presentation of village life, a true document of its physical as well as mental activities. My reading of Indian fiction in English has been relatively a disappointing experience since it has in most cases nearly failed to hold a mirror, as it were, to the rural life in its essence—the western influence is so heavy on most of the writers.

I have made an earnest attempt to re-create the village life in this novel constantly keeping in mind that should be thoroughly Indian. Now it is upto the readers to say the final say.

T. V. Reddy

The Vultures

1. The avenging sun, exhausted with his day's blazing journey, at last touched the western hills after drowning the land under the waves of smouldering heat. Even the rays of the setting sun were ruthless, furiously making their last efforts in spreading the unkind curtain of moderately subdued sweltering beams over the scorched land. Every particle of the ground sent out hot breath and their terrible impact was physically felt by the inhabitants. Just as the sun set, the eastern sky had turned crimson, gradually paling into rose. The shade of the blood-red eastern sky had fallen on the ground and the barren fields and the boiling rocks shone with the crimson shade giving the impression as though it is a repulsive reflection of a livid lake of blood formed by the carnage of all the good in the world. Within the distance of the sight there was neither a green field nor pasture ground except one or two isolated patches of paddy crop. The sky was beautiful, devilishly delightful to look at, with its dapple grey colour fast approaching at the heels of the fading rosy red. Birds, weak and ready to fall at any moment, flew with fatigue-stricken wings in the sultry sky to their dry abodes. The birds had finally perched on the tops and branches of the trees with neither leaves nor flowers nor fruits and noisily prepared themselves to enter their pendent nests, loosely hanging from the boughs. The atmosphere was dry with not a trace

of humidity in it and the late evening breeze gave the impression as if one was near the oven.

It was almost dusk and Ramayya dragged his wearied feet home-ward from his arid fields. With a heavy plough on his shoulder and a pair of oxen going in front of him, he plodded his way, crossing a continuous stretch of barren land. At a considerable distance the tops of a few houses could be seen in the receding light of the dusk. Profusely sweating in his body owing to the day-long labour in his field and total physical exhaustion, he pushed his reluctant steps forward with desperate determination to reach his habitation early so that he could relieve his bony shoulder from the heavy weight of the plough. The weather was as still as death and the air was torpid ; occasionally a gust of hot wind blew combining the earth and the sky with a thin film of dry dust and blowing the same into the eyes of the people moving in the streets. Ramayya, feeble and emaciated, fighting his way across the occasional wind, entered the street, holding tightly in his hand the two ropes of his bulls lest they should go helter-skelter causing additional trouble to him. Unmindful of others sitting on the elevated stone or cement platforms in front of their respective houses, he stepped into his house. It was a humble hut, rectangular in its shape with mud walls, roofed with thatch, and a small kerosene lamp had driven away the devilish darkness with its meagre light spread all over the house inside. Outside the house there was a semi-permanent pandal resting on stone pillars and containing closely-laid tall horizontal bamboo sticks fastened tightly with

palmyra fibre, above which the hay was securely stacked. He rested the plough against the outside wall of his hut, leaving the bulls near a huge trough containing water to the brim. His wife Parvathi came from inside with a small round vessel of water and gave it to her partner, who blankly looking at her took it and emptied it feeling renewed life in his perched tongue. To the left of the house in the open place under the tamarind tree two wooden pegs were firmly and deeply planted in the ground and holding the ropes of the bulls, patting their backs, he led them to the pegs and fastened the ropes to them. He then brought the ladder leaning to the wall and kept it inclined to the hay stack. After climbing it, he pulled two bundles of hay and coming down he dumped it before the hungry bulls which were eagerly awaiting their dried up diet. Heaving a deep sigh, he came to the pandal, drew a bamboo cot woven with twisted fibre, spread his towel on it and stretched his aching body on it. His eyes looked up inertly at the lifeless bamboos above and his mind was heavy with too huge a bundle of problems, surely outnumbering the straws in a bundle of hay.

His wife came to him and said, 'Hot water is ready. Go and finish off your bath. You had your meal before noon. You must be hungry. Go and have your bath. There is no use in lying and thinking. Poor folk like us are created by the cruel God only to suffer. We will be free from troubles only when we enter our grave'.

Getting up and keeping the partly torn-out towel on his shoulder, he said with a gloomy face, 'You speak true,

Parvathi. Constant thinking spoils the health. At times I fear I may go mad'.

With a compulsive force of adamant will, brushing aside all the troublesome thoughts crowding into his melancholy mind, he came near the place where he had to take his bath in the open place. There was a large flat stone under the neem tree opposite to the place where the bulls were tied. On this stone he stood with a piece of cloth around his loins and close to it an earthen pot was kept, filled with hot water. Darkness had spread everywhere with not a glimmering light to make anything visible. Ramayya preferred darkness which in verity seemed to be in tune with the murky state of his life. Darkness appeared to him more comforting and consoling than the light which would expose his frightening poverty to the world.

Soon after finishing his bath, he came and sat beneath the pandal and the lamp burning inside was now brought there which spread its scanty light as the meal was served to him there. He preferred to sit and have his food here owing to its airy condition, whereas inside the house it was too sultry. Though he was terribly hungry, when he saw along with the cooked rice the tamarind chutney which became a permanent part of his meal, major part of his appetite dismally diluted; yet the pangs of hunger were so terrible as to drown all other thoughts of taste and preference. At last when the ordeal of eating the meal was over, he sat still for a while, slowly got up and approached the cot. He stretched his body on it resting his head on a rough and

hard pillow prepared by his wife with all the useless rags in the house. His wife came to him, spread a mat on the floor by the side of his cot and spoke in a low tone :

'Today letter from Suresh has come. Shall I bring it' ? He replied, 'Usual matter. Perhaps he wants money. What more does he write' ?

Uttering these words in a semi-slumberous tone, within minutes he fell into sound sleep overcome with utter physical exhaustion and fatigue.

2. The small village in which Ramayya lived was named from ancient times as Siripalle as the few people who founded it generations before were fairly well-to-do. It had tasted the vicissitudes of fortune and its size had been comparatively cut down by the ravages of time as it was now reduced to fifty and odd houses almost halved from its former glory. Ages back it saw prosperity and poverty, riches and wretchedness, fairness and foul play mingled in equal proportions. Now it is relatively a humble village predominantly inhabited by people who could not get a single meal without labouring everyday, and only two or three families were rich—magnificently rich hoarding lakhs and lakhs of rupees which went on multiplying at an alarming rate through exorbitant interest which the poor folk in dire need paid regularly with immense gratitude. Four or five houses were terraced buildings with a modern appearance, among which two were two-storeyed buildings resembling two solitary towers facing each other on the two sides of an ancient forsaken citadel. The remaining houses were all humble cottages with mud walls and thatched roofs mostly

covered with various vegetable creepers like snake-gourd, bottle-gourd, beans etc., presenting a lovable picture. The founders of the village had so planned that it was divided into four broad parallel streets with enormous width spacious enough to accommodate two bullock carts at a time and the houses so hygienically arranged that there was much gap between any two houses. But recently encroachment into the streets became a rule for them which they did with a spirit of competition making the streets as narrow as possible.

The village was located on the bank of a small river, Kalyani, which in ancient times was said to be flowing always, whereas of late it was regarded a rare sight to see the flow of water in it. At a short distance of three miles the range of Srigriri hills with a thick and enclosing forest presented a beautiful sight. To the other side of the river at a distance of a mile was situated the once glorious and populous town of Srigriri. Now Srigriri was reduced to a tiny township, or it would be more appropriate to call it a major village. The people of the neighbouring villages depended mainly on this town for everything whether they wanted to buy cloth or provisions or soap or a slate. A few offices were also concentrated there besides an old High School to which all the pupils of the surrounding villages went, and the people of that area had to come to Srigriri on domestic or official work in the Revenue office or Samithi office or in the Bank.

Ramayya was now a middle-aged man of fifty years, but his grey hair and wrinkled brow gave the impression as if he were ten years older than his actual age. With

his lean and lanky physical frame he seemed to be a fit model of a man in misery for any painter with skill. Until he entered the threshold of youth he led a care-free life full of gaiety and contentment under the protection of his father who brought him up with an abundance of affection and whose only aim was to make his Ramu, as he was fondly called, live a decent and respectable life of an educated man with an employment in some Government office and not lead a hard-working life of an average farmer like him who could not even dream of feeding himself without toiling in the field. But like most of the boys of his age Ramu failed to make progress in his studies and with great difficulty he studied upto fifth class in his village school run under a peepal tree by a strict and ferocious teacher always remembered with his cane and a tidy tuft dancing behind his head to his angry tunes and furious fumes emerging from his snuff-stuffed nostrils. As a boy he was so terribly afraid of the teacher that he avoided going to the school many times, running away from the house and hiding himself in the mango groves, till his father came in search of him and brought him bodily to the school, where the school master pinched his tender ears till they turned blood-red, squeezed his tender thighs turning a deaf ear to the wailings of the lad and instructed him in a thunderous tone to stand on one leg till the evenings. By the time he realized his responsibility, his father breathed his last and the burden of the family fell heavily on the inexperienced shoulders of the youth, who like his father had to rely on the plough for his sustenance. Though his education was

scanty, it was good enough for him as he could read and write Telugu freely and with an astonishing ease and felicity even at this age. In his leisure time he read the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha and explained the full meaning of every padya i. e., stanza to the illiterate villagers who sat round him. He could free'y recite from Sumati Sataka, Vemanna Sataka and Amara Kosa. Such was the depth of his good old education though its scope was limited and he never forgot what he had learnt in the 'Veethi-badi' or the school under the green wood tree in the street.

Parvathi, in her forties, appearing to be fair-complexioned in her prime of youth, was still good-looking with streaks of beauty mocked by a few lines of grey hair. Ramu, wild and stubborn once, became mild and tamed when too large a responsibility of steering his family single-handedly through a series of stresses and strains fell on him. She was kind and generous and she never sent out a beggar with empty hands. A short time after her marriage, Ramu's mother passed away and so the entire domestic responsibility fell on her slender shoulders at quite a young age. while her husband left the house at sunrise to the field, she looked after the house alone without any helping hand till sun-set when her partner came back to the house with tired limbs. They had a cow which was exclusively under her care and protection and by selling the milk they got some amount which was utilized for sundry expenses and purchasing daily domestic commodities. Forenoon was entirely occupied by her with domestic duties and the sun would climb to the peak of the

The Vultures

sky perpendicular to the head by the time she prepared the curry and the midday meal. In the afternoon she led her cow to the pasture ground, grazed it and returned at sunset. Again she was busy in lighting the oven with the twigs she gathered while the cow grazed in cooking the rice and boiling water for their bath. Though there was never a day in her married life of three and twenty years that was not subject to the sharp pricking shafts of penury, she patiently bore all the hardships without either complaining or arguing with her poor husband who found it hard to reconcile himself to such a uniformly miserable fate. She was regarded as a good housewife by all the neighbouring families and Ramu was considered lucky and fortunate in having such an understanding lady for his wife.

Suresh and Santhi were the only fruits of their marital bliss and undiluted conjugal love and the former had now completed his one and twenty years with scarcely any thorn of life pricking his handsome body, tender in age but strong in frame. He was the apple of his parents' eyes as he happened to be the only son of the tradition-minded Hindu parents who were immensely content at the thought that they were not sinners to die without children. They felt much relieved at the idea that their lives were not meaningless and they would not die unknown because there was their son who would make the family name remembered by posterity through his progeny. Ramayya and Parvathi dreamt many sweet dreams about the fulgent future of the son who should be fairly educated and sent to higher studies and fittingly employed

with ample salary which alone could reward their untold misery and suffering experienced everyday by them. Suresh to some extent came upto the expectations of his fondly hoping parents and he was a brilliant boy in the class. As a humble pupil of the primary school at his village, he had attracted the kind attention of his sincere teacher Narayana who gave necessary encouragement to the boy for further studies and persuaded his parents to admit the boy in the High School in Srigiri. Combining intelligence and diligence in the right ratio, the boy had now entered the degree class. There also the old teacher Narayana encouraged the boy and persuaded the penury-stricken parents to send the boy to the college at Tirupati, a fairly big and fast developing town at a short distance from the village. Suresh was in the third and final year of the B. A. Class, preparing himself to face the examination which would come off after a couple of hard months and that was the reason why he stayed at Tirupati itself this short duration until the completion of the examination, even though all these years he travelled daily to the college to minimize the expenditure. Never for a moment was he unconscious of the image of the tired skeleton of his father earning every rupee after soaking his body in sweat and he made up his mind to come out from the college in flying colours with a degree only after which he could relieve his parents from their wonted misery.

Santhi, the meek and modest daughter of her parents, with her charming face and comely shape, growing in the house as tender as a flower, had reached her sixteen,

blooming in adolescent glamour. As she was reaching the prime of her youth, the parents became more and more restive and mentally agitated regarding her marriage and future which proved to be a great problem to them. They gave her the opportunity of having some education to a modest extent and she after completing the primary education was sent to High School where she studied upto tenth class at which her studies stopped on account of financial stringencies and she remained at home as a full-time assistant to her mother whose health was gradually deteriorating owing to continuous work at home which she did single handedly with incredible patience. From the time when her school career ended, domestic responsibility fell on her and she got as much assistance and guidance as possible from her mother who now looked after the work outside the house, especially in the fields. Santhi had no rest as she was drowned in her daily routine and only after her midday meal during the leisure time she employed herself in stitching old and torn-out clothes and in the remaining few minutes she read some book or Telugu weekly which she borrowed from girls of her age living in the neighbouring houses. Though all her friends had variety of sarees and jewels of gold and silver, she, inspite of her natural feminine cravings for such things, drove away with great difficulty all such dear thoughts from her humble mind. Her quick growth and full development filled the hearts and heads of her parents with an inexpressible fear, for they had to find out a suitable bridegroom for her which was not such an easy task for a poor man like Ramayya without any means.

The humble habitation of Ramayya was a thatched hut with rectangularly built mud walls which were neatly white-washed both sides. Thatch was spread densely on the bamboo structure inclined on all the four sides supported by a horizontal wooden beam at the top. At present the four corners of the roof brightly became as hospitable as the generous matting of the house in giving an open welcome indiscriminately to the friendly rays of the sun and the moon. The owner of the house, who helplessly found himself in monetary straits, could not think of any improvement to the roof as he already found it too difficult to make both ends meet. In front of the house touching the walls to the two sides of the door were erected two elevated stone platforms which usually served as ready-made beds to rest his tired limbs which he did either by spreading a mat or a cotton towel on it or even on the cold bare even surface of the lengthy stone. Around the house could be seen an unevenly built and partly collapsed mud wall with its open gate in front of the house facing the street. In the considerable vacant place in the backyard could be seen jasmine plants and at this time of the season they were full of blossoming flowers as white as milk, spreading their fragrance on all sides. These flowery plants were solely taken care of by Santhi who watered them regularly. Ramayya at times enjoyed the balmy wind spread by the green leaves of the neem tree and relished the sweet smell of the jasmynes, but mostly his head was heavy with the threatening problems of life for which he had not even a remote idea of the shadow of their solution. Even the

cool and healthy breeze coming from the margosa tree and flower giving plants around the house did not succeed in making him happy for a moment.

Ramayya with sheer stubbornness and deeply formed decision sent his son Suresh for higher studies. Though his means was too meagre, he made up his mind to face the multitudinous troubles when his son had to stay at Tirupati for the last six months, out of which three months had already passed, to prepare hard for the final examinations of the Degree class. He was sure the boy would successfully complete his course saving every paisa and spending as minimum an amount as possible in the town, which of late had become one of the costliest places on account of the enormous floating population in addition to the increasing number of student population and the vast hordes of people settling there everyday. Sitting on an old cot below the pandal and holding the letter which reached him the previous day, he was brooding seriously even before the sun-rise. He muttered to himself, 'Well, I have to adjust somehow Rs 200/-and that I shall soon send to my son before the end of this week. He requires it for examination fee, for rent and food. If God is kind, not for long these troubles will continue. Only for three months, we have to suffer like this. Afterwards he will get a job and we will all be happy. He should not discontinue his studies. I am fated to work like a bull. My son should not suffer like myself. Yes, I will seek the advice of Narayana, my old friend.'

Narayana was a bosom friend of Ramayya from his early boyhood. Both were born in the same village, were

related to each other, and they had studied together. When the latter's career ended in the village school, the former continued his studies underwent training, settled in life as a teacher. Since a long time he worked as a teacher in his village itself in the Elementary school. As he was good in his person, sincere in his profession and faithful to his salary, unlike most others of his noble profession now-a-days, he was liked by one and all in and around the village who in one voice wanted him to continue and saw that he was not transferred. He was a man with abundant experience in life having personally felt the strains and stresses of life. While he was quite young, his wife passed away giving birth to a female child just two years after his marriage and it was a severe shock for him from which he could not recover for a long period. He christened his child as Jyothi and resolved to spend his life in bringing up his daughter for whose future happiness he did not even think of marrying again. Though he could not be called rich, he was definitely not poor, for he owned a moderate chunk of fertile land, in which he raised two crops of paddy every year which was more than sufficient for him as his house consisted of only two members—himself and his daughter. Jyothi was of the same age as of Santhi and both were so intimate that they studied, moved and spent their time together and together they discontinued their school education—the latter due to poverty and the former due to domestic burden, because she had to look after her father as there was no other in the family. Nārāyana's house, which was a tiled one with brick walls was situated at the

end of the same street separated by a few houses from Ramayya's. As the sun did not rise yet, he was lying on the cot covered with a blanket, resting his head on a pillow though he was before awakened from the night sleep.

The street was busy with the usual bustle from early in the morning. The housewives rose early at the dawn and started their day's work. They swept in the open place in front of their houses and in their respective parts of the street, sprinkled densely water mixed with cowdung and decorated the ground with various flour designs. Men were busily walking to their fields driving their bullocks and controlling them separately by holding their ropes and carrying the yokes on their shoulders. Some others carried spades in their hands and ploughs on their shoulders. Aged mothers shouted at their lazy sons still asleep without getting up early to go to the fields. Young girls drew away the baskets releasing the hens and cocks, which leaped fluttering their wings and went atop the cowdung heaps and hay stacks announcing their happy arrival with their shrill crowings. A few people who were landless labourers, holding hatchets in their hands, paced northwards to the nearby Srigiri hills with the intention of cutting the sticks and bringing the bundle of sticks, carrying it on their heads and selling it in the small town of Srigiri where they would purchase the essential commodities with the money they got. On the top of the huge tree Kokil the pleasant bird, sang its delightful and melodious morning greeting in shrill echoing notes.

Jyothi who had got up early started her routine by drawing water from the deep well which was in their

backyard. After sweeping in front of her house and sprinkling the thick cowdung water with a round mug, she began filling the ground with flower designs enthusiastically with her inclined body which was in full bloom and every part and limb of which moved gracefully, worthy of a masterpiece by an immortal painter. Feeling the approaching steps behind, she looked back and greeted the person in a cheerful tone "Come in, uncle. Some urgency has brought you here so early, if I am not wrong". Ramayya spoke with a forced smile, "Yes, Jyothi. It is the usual urgency. You seem to have got up so early, for you have almost finished your morning work. God is not kind to you. Had your mother been alive, she would not have allowed you to do any hard work or touch a broomstick with your delicate hands".

The girl, touched with tenderness, replied with moistened eyes, "I have no idea of my mother, uncle. My hands are always tight with work in the house. Practically no rest. I accept my fate without any complaint".

Narayana, fully awake, got up, sat on the cot and greeted his friend, 'Hey, Rama, come and sit. Why, you look so gloomy. What is the matter? 'Amma Jyothi, prepare coffee quickly and give a glass to your uncle'. Jyothi, hurrying up with milk and sugar to the oven and lighting it with dry twigs, answered, in a couple of minutes it will be ready, father. Uncle, sit and have a talk. I will appear in no time'.

Ramayya spoke with a wry smile, 'Narayya, my life is a torn leaf. I am not that fortunate or rich to have the luxury of taking coffee. I am born to suffer and let the

process continue I never drink coffee. You know it.' The teacher replied, 'of course, in the past I was never accustomed to it. 'Of late, I am used to it. My daughter relishes it and she has successfully trained me. In these days even in the remote villages the habit of drinking coffee has crept and it has become a sign of civilization. One who doesn't take coffee is considered to be uncivilized. Every field of life marks the entry of artificial values. Well, what is the matter ?'

Taking out a musty letter from the fold of the dhoti near the waist, he gave it to him and asked him what he should do. Narayya, taking the glass of coffee and sipping it, read it and gave it back. He thoughtfully said, 'To get two hundred rupees in two days is not so easy, especially in these critical days of drought. If I have the amount there would not be any problem. You know my fields are dry. No hope of cultivating it, as there is not a drop of water in the well ; without this job I would be starving. What source can we think of ?' 'The same problem has been tormenting my mind without giving scope for any mental peace. I have had a restless sleep, and sometime after midnight, I woke up and could not get any sleep. If I do not send the amount in time, my son has to come away discontinuing his studies and all the money, time and labour spent so far will go waste.'

'Have you thought of any person from whom you can borrow ? There are a few people in this village who have amassed large sums. They give it to others at an exorbitant rate of interest. When we ask, they cut a sorry figure. In Rudraiah's house and in Rangaiah's lakhs of

rupees are snoring and there are many others whose annual income is never less than ten thousand.'

'I already owe Rs. 5000/- to Rudraiah and hence I really doubt whether he would give me a single paisa. I had mortgaged my little bit of land to him and he is an abominable fellow. You know it pretty well. The other moneyed people of our village are anxiously awaiting my early downfall. My son's education has become an eye-sore to them. They do not tolerate the son of a poor man getting a degree and becoming a graduate. Whenever I approached them, they generously showed me lip-sympathy without extending any real help.' 'Such has become way of the world. Now a days the villages have become so bad, horribly bad. One man will be planning with devilish zeal to destroy the other man. If we ask their help for good things, they not only show their empty hands. They try to discourage us. The swift ruin of the neighbour is the main aim of the village. I have no hope of its betterment. Anyhow there is nothing wrong in approaching Rudraiah as you owe him already. Go to him and explain the need. No doubt, he is bad, but others are worse.'

Ramayya stood up and retraced his steps with a sorrowful countenance. He felt his feet terribly weak at every step. He knew his friend well and knew his present state. If only he had the amount, he would have gladly helped his friend without any second thought. He had helped Ramayya on various occasions when he was placed in tight corner economically. He had always encouraged for the future of Suresh and never refused anything for his sake if it was in his possession. Moreover Narayana

had his secret ambition. If Suresh would settle well, he could give his daughter in marriage to him as both would make a handsome and amiable young couple. Instead of going in search of a husband, he could choose this young man who was good and fair, with a right understanding of his position and who had great respect for his old teacher. The son-in-law could as well settle in his house and his only daughter, the light of his life, would always be present before his eyes looking after her lonely, venerable and declining father with care and tenderness in his old age. On this occasion he found himself in financial straits and that is why he felt sorry at his heart for not being able to come to his friend's help. Ramayya with his head slightly bent and heavy with anxiety, walking slowly homeward thought of others whom he could approach for help trying to avoid Rudraiah whom he loathed and dreaded most. After repeated thoughts he decided to approach the same man as he was not hopeful of getting any help from others.

(4) Opposite to the humble hut of Ramayya could be seen the majestically situated two-storeyed building of Rudraiah with its huge stone compound wall and cattle shed behind it which had occupied a large area. With its tall structure and various old decorations it had dwarfed all the remaining houses, and the corners and the centre of the house had gabled structures and the front entrance had a conical type of gable tower with wooden carvings intricately cut by a master carpenter. In front of the house adjacent to the main door there was a big verandah which was spacious enough to accommodate a fairly large

number of people. It contained two big halls and many rooms. His cattle shed which was of large dimensions accommodated about twenty cattle—cows, bulls and buffaloes, which were looked after by a considerable number of servants who were given food and clothing and no wages and who had always been loyal to their master as though they were fed freely. Two other servants with their wives had been working in the house, doing practically every work. Opposite to this building on the other side of the street only four or five houses had a tolerably living appearance, while the remaining houses were in a decadent state.

Rudraiah was the head of his village, more popularly known in political terms as the Sarpanch or the President of his Village Panchayat, a so-called honourable post mostly coveted in almost every Indian village in the modern times on account of which every peaceful village is torn asunder with petty politics, hostilities, rivalries and riots. Rudraiah had been functioning as the Panchayat President ever since the Panchayat Raj came into existence without any opposing voice. He got himself elected unanimously by hook or crook without giving scope for conducting elections as his chances of winning the election were very bleak in case elections were actually conducted. He was the Sarpanch of Siripalle which included two more tiny hamlets, and he tolerated no opposition. The majority of the people were so illiterate that they did not know that elections would be periodically conducted for choosing the President and they thought that only a wealthy man like Rudraiah would be placed in

that position for ever, because he was the President from the commencement of that system of local administrative bodies. He was an uncrowned monarch of the village with none bold enough to question his ways however tyrannical, despotic and devilish they were. It was only in the time of his father that they became so rich unexpectedly from the position of humble farmer. During the days of the British Raj, at the time of the Second World War when there was so much demand for foodgrains, he collected and hoarded plenty of rice which he sold in black market for abnormal profit. During that period when famine was destroying all the people, the starving villagers sold most of their land at too cheap a rate, and Rudra's father catching his fortune by the forelock, found himself suddenly a big landlord of the area. Rudra, who was considered as a useless and hopeless boy without any rudimentary education, soon after his father becoming prosperous, was not entirely disregarded. In his youth he had indulged in vicious ways and immoral and licentious activities of all kinds and ever since he became rich, he was not as neglected as he had been before. After his father's death he became the sole inheritor of that huge ill-acquired property, which he enlarged by every possible foul method. He rolled in money and lent it to the needy people in and around the village at an exorbitant interest having mortgaged their lands. A few years after when the miserable borrowers failed to repay it in time, he annexed their lands and houses. His wife Rukmini was in no way inferior to him in increasing the wealth. The poor farmers and labourers in and around that area had on most occasions pawned with her their copper

and brass vessels, rings, ear-rings and many other gold jewels for petty amounts to meet their pressing expenses in domestic and agricultural fields; and when they failed to pay it back within the stipulated period, the lady with the connivance of the cruel and greedy husband, a hungry wolf and an agent of Mammon, claimed full rights on their pledged articles. As he became older and grew richer he degenerated from bad to worse. Everyone in the village was forced to respect him not because he deserved it but because he was feared most.

He had a son and two daughters. His son Nagaraj was of the same age as of Suresh. From his early days he was a naughty and headstrong boy marked with malicious intentions and deriving pleasure while others were suffering. Though clever in playing tricks, he was dull in studies, and even though with all the power and influence of his father he was pushed up from one class to another in the school, he failed to soar above the airy regions of the High School. He was proud enough to call himself a matriculate in spite of the miserable and widely known fact that he failed many times in the tenth class. Even as a school boy he was always unruly indulging in rowdyism, having a strong group of rich and spoiled boys at his beck and call whose ring leader he had become. He was jealous of Suresh whose bright academic career sent piercing shafts of envy and ire into his heart. At times he teased him, but he was afraid of touching him physically, as the latter was of strong and sturdy physique with his hard habitual manual labour. As his father was busy in political and economic affairs of the village, his son had often gone to the fields in

order to supervise the agricultural activities so as to have a direct control over the coolies. More often than not he spent his days with sumptuous fillings of his capacious stomach, aimless wanderings in the streets and frequent visitings to the nearby towns for gambling, brozing and all sorts of indulgences. The hot blood of this lazy young man craved for lustful desires and to appease his lascivious temperament he made hectic trials to talk to every possible young woman, unmarried or married, indiscriminately. He became a pandy and a fashionable young man of the village, feverishly trying to win the favour or the hand or the heart of innocent teenaged girls.

Rudraiah's elder daughter was happily married to a fair young man who was working as the Inspector of the police, and the position of his son-in-law in the police department added new dimensions to the sphere of his prestige and popularity, clearing away the restrictions to his limited use of wickedness. This daughter with her natural greed and ambitious dream of exercising power on others felt herself the happy and fortunate creature when she was wedded to a police official who usually commanded so much of respect from all sorts of people. In a way she inherited the spirit of her father in displaying her pomp with pride and in commending others with an air of superiority.

Sandhya, the younger daughter, was quite mild and docile feeling sympathy to the poor and afflicted. She was a close friend to Santhi and as both of them were of the same age, their intimacy was further intensified by their sympathetic understanding of each other. She had the same attachment to Jyothi also. These three were inseparable

friends and they used to spend their leisure time in Narayana's house freely exchanging their ideas and talking open-heartedly and maintaining no secrets. In her nature she was entirely a different person from her elder sister and there was nothing in common between them. While her sister was haughty and proud, Sandhya was modest and pleasing never attempting to hurt other's feelings and never talking to others in an insulting way. While her sister talked with a sense of condescension to the villagers not so rich as they, her conversation was quite friendly mingled with pure affection. She was a fully blooming flower in her teenage with beautiful features, fair complexion and a finely shaped body with an artistic finish. She was the apple of her father's eye and he had an abundant affection for this innocent daughter with a tender heart; he wondered how she would get on in this evil world.

Rudraiah, having taken his breakfast, sat in the open verandah in front of his house, relaxing his fat limbs on an easy chair. His body seemed to take rest, but his mind wandered through various fields and spheres for the fulfilment of his high ambitions of achieving political power and becoming an undisputed political leader of that entire region thus intending to acquire an axe to grind for himself. While his physical frame deliberately longed for cosy comfort, his head was full of cosy dreams of his bright future. From the sub-conscious level his mind was jarked into the familiar steps. The Panchayet President with a borrowed smile opened his broad lips with a note of reluctant greeting, 'Hey, Ramaiah what tidings have brought you so early? Have you not gone to the fields? Though you are

residing in the opposite house nearly a week has gone since we met.

Ramayya sitting on the mosaic floor spoke in submissive tone, 'My whole time is spent in my field. There is hardly any water in the well. I fear my six months' labour may go waste if no showers fall.'

'Scarcity of water has become quite a common problem now. Except the new well, all my other three wells have become dry. I have spent Rs 30,000 for digging the new well

'Rich people like you can do it. But poor folk like me can not even dream of such things. We took above our heads for rains to fall.'

'Everyone has his own troubles. By the by, how is Suresh' ?

'For his sake I have come to you. I badly need Rs 200/- to send it to my son urgently. Already I owe you so much. Soon, if all is well, he will get a job and I will repay with interest.'

With frown in his looks, Rudraiah replied after a deliberate pause: 'With what face do you ask me money again? Nearly five years back you took from me a loan of Rs. 3,000/- which has now come to Rs. 5,000/- with

interest. You have paid me back neither principal nor interest. In such a case how can you ask me money again? Money is hard earned and it is not a heap of broken pieces of tiles and pebbles.' He broke his characteristic jargon awaiting an answer, and then seeing the drooping face of his afflicted neighbour, said in a seemingly compassionate tone, 'Ramaiah, I don't mean to hurt you. You know I am a straight-forward man. Money is money; business is business. I can be sympathetic to you in other things, but in matters of money I am always strict. If all people borrow money like you and nobody pays it back in time, what shall become of me?' The other man, suppressing the simmering hatred against the former spoke imploringly, 'As a last resort I have approached you after a great deal of deliberation. Sufferings won't last long. By this time next year, I promise to pay you back at least half the loan I have borrowed. I spend sleepless nights owing to these debts. Even if I sleep, the debt does not sleep.'

For a few minutes there was silence, sullen in its nature. The landlord who now received the daily newspaper 'Andhra Patrika,' began looking into its contents or seemed so, appearing to be oblivious of others' presence. Feeling the silence unbearable, Ramayya who

did not want to stay there a moment longer after finalizing his affair, broke the deadly silence, 'Please do consider. I promise that this will be the last time for me to approach you for monetary help. You alone have to save me from this predicament. I accept whatever terms you propose. You know me from the beginning. I stand on my word!'

The money-lender in his characteristically business-like tone opened his lips drily, 'You have already mortgaged your land to me. So you cannot take the loan on land. Poor fellow as you are, you have only a thatched hut whose value is very negligible. Your entire house-site along with the hut does not equal the amount you want. Anyhow you are my neighbour and in a way related to me, and so I shall help you by giving the loan provided you mortgage your hut along with the site. It is left to you whether to accept my proposal or not, depending on the intensity of your need'. Ramayya, quite stunned at this proposal, was tongue-tied for a moment and found himself in a critical condition in coming to a quick decision. He, who did not expect such callous conditions for a paltry amount, was thoroughly taken aback and after a great deal of dilemma, he said, 'My need is so great that it compels me to abide by your words. I am grateful to you for having rescued me from such a critical condition'. The

landlord said with an air of finality, 'You come in the afternoon and I will ask that school master Narayan to come and write the promisory bond, and after signing it you can take the sum'. With these words Ramayya stood up and left the place with a heavy heart and a confused mind full of mixed ideas and thoughts.

Rudraiah saw the poor man going away and laughed heartily. Now he summoned Gangulu his head-servant or paleru* who was nearly thirty-five years old. He was a strong and sturdy fellow of more than medium height and a trusted servant serving the house from his early days. His father had been a servant of Rudraiah's father in his palmy state and Gangulu was born and bred in their house. He became a member of the house and entered the shoes of his father after his death. He was most trusted and there were no secrets that were kept away from him. All the activities—important assignments and activities of clandestine nature were given to him and Rudraiah had so much of faith and confidence in him, that most of the times he did not go to the fields, leaving Gangulu to supervise over the coolies working in the fields so as to

*A Telegu word for a trusted full-time servant in the house of a landlord who makes him both as an agricultural coolie and cowherd.

extract maximum work from them. Once again looking into the newspaper and reading loudly its content, turned to his paleru and asked, 'Hey Gangu, are you coming from the fields? How many coolies have you brought there for weeding the paddy fields?'

In a moderately humble tone Gangu replied, 'I have left fifty coolies, all women, near the field. I will see that the entire weeding is completed by midday.'

Twisting his bushy moustache the landlord spoke, 'Extract the maximum work from these dirty beggars. If any does not work properly, cut her wages. Say it is my word. I will go after sometime. Hasten to the fields.'

Hesitantly the paleru added, 'Ayyah, some of them are demanding from us to distribute among them betel nut and betel nut leaves and tobacco bits. They say it is a habit with them and without that they cannot put their mind into the work'.

With a flushed face, Rudraiah shouted angrily, 'How many guts have these bitches to demand all the rotten stuff from me? They have no means to buy rice. Now these ill-begotten wenches want luxuries from me. If they wag their tails again, tell them I will cut their wages entirely. Shameless starving sluts!' Gangulu silently sneaked away.

Rudraiah, looking at the receding figure of Gangulu,

his right-hand man, felt proud of him. As he thought of his life till now, he could not think of a day he had without the helping hand of his paleru. He was his agent, guide, confederate and protector. He remembered an incident which took place nearly a decade ago. When he was supervising the ploughing in his field one of the two newly-bought fatty and lusty bulls releasing itself from under the yoke, pounced upon him for no fault of his and when it was about to smash his battened chest with its pointed horns, Gangu saved him. Gangu became a man of his inner circle giving suggestions now and then and doing as per the instructions of his master. More often than not, he was employed in doing certain wicked and evil deeds in dark nights observing strict secrecy knowing fully well that most of the activities assigned to him were of sinister nature, he performed all the tasks with implicit obedience. He trod the path of evil which gradually became fascinating for him and he curiously relished it afterwards.

Rudraiah and his wife Rukmini depended for everything on this able-bodied Gangulu. Ever since Gangu became his trusted man, the former left his entire agriculture in his hands. All the four wells of his master were looked after by him and he regularly shouted at the servants who were

1. A respectable word of address of Telegu equivalent to Sir.

watching over their respective wells and pump-sets installed in them, each of which supplied water for not less than ten acres of land. Of course three out of four wells totally dried up during the previous summer ; yet one well, which was recently dug, continuously supplied water, sufficient for all the land around it. While all the fields of the village were dry and barren, this plot with its dark green paddy fields presented a feast for the sight, an envious sight for the rest of the villagers. Gangulu went from well to well, from field to field, inspecting whether everything functioned normally or not. In the absence of the master, his wife gave the required amount to Gangulu and he disbursed it among the coolies. She came to the fields and observed whether the labourers worked properly or not, whether they respected the word of their paleru or not. Gangulu carried out her instructions with greater promptness and zeal than he did when he was asked by the master. His intimacy with the lady was more than that of the usual nature. The coolies, who did not possess any trace of rebellious nature, were more afraid of this surly and saucy man than the actual land-lord, who was in no way inferior to his assistant in inflicting pain and punishment both by and indirect means on them. His angry sounds echoed in their timid hearts and his furious looks created shivers in them.

In the afternoon Ramayya, having taken the amount after mortgaging his house along with the site to Rudraiah approached his house. What he had decided to avoid so far in his life he had to do it at last, compelled by the critical circumstances and driven by the hard hand of the fate. Disappointed to the core and cursing his helpless stars he came to the man whom he hated most and signing the mortgage bond he took the amount, the obnoxious amount, which he dreaded always but which he could not totally reject, as he was a human being with his feet firmly rooted to the ground. As he received it, he thought of his son—the only thought which consoled his drooping spirits and lifted him from falling into the hot and hateful stream of oppression ; yet he felt happy for a moment when the vision of the bright and colourful future of his son passed before his mind's eye, but in the next moment the joyous shadow vanished into vacuum just as it came from nothingness and it was replaced by the ghastly image of the horrifying demon of penury with his loud laughter threatening the humble man to dash his wits

With his head reeling with thoughts of oppression and helplessness he stepped before his house. As he stepped, he observed three strangers elegantly dressed

looking as employees, haughtily arguing with his wife and shouting repeatedly. One man brought out the vessels from inside the house and threw them outside with considerable force. Parvathi, Ramayya's wife, with her folded hands, stood in front of the door and requested the employee not to throw the vessels like that and to wait until her husband came. Three employees paying a deaf ear to her repeated requests, with renewed haughtiness and arrogance, rebuked her husband for not having paid the loan in time in spite of repeated intimations from the Rural Bank. Now the employees of the same bank, brought an official order for the attachment of the defaulter's property.

At this stage Ramayya entered the house. As he saw those officials, he immediately recognized one of them—the first one was Mr. Krishnan working as the supervisor for that area, whom he knew well. The second man was the manager of the bank and the third a sale officer connected to it, they were accompanied by the office peon. The officer was fat and hefty having heaped up so much of obesity to his corpulent frame in a neat and tucked-up dress, and he had one or two files in his hands which moved majestically. By his side stood the supervisor as meekly as an imbecile beast by the side of a belligerent and

bullying animal. He was the man who did all the talking to the woman of the house giving little consideration to the requests of the mother and her daughter. His voice was mechanical and it was totally devoid of all human considerations of sympathy. His words, shot vigorously and energetically from his mouth, came callously like bullets from a machine gun. Their peon with his peevish looks stood like a wolf near the door ready to throw out any vessel or object at the instructions of his superiors and to accept whatever amount that would be given to him by the inmates so that he would be the harbinger of peace in the place in making a compromise by striking a bargain with his officials who were voracious enough to snatch away even the offal from the jackal. Among these three the supervisor was a well-known man to Ramayya who gave him all kinds of assistance and help both in kind and cash for the completion of his work, i. e., the sanctioning of his long-pending loan. Ramayya's wife had implored them to be seated quietly for a minute and said her husband would come in the meanwhile. But her words went unheeded and the supervisor in collusion with the officers tried to exercise his authority with intention of drawing the attention of the neighbours in general and the girl inside the house in particular. His voluptuous looks repeatedly pried for the innocent girl

and as he found himself deprived of a gluttonous glance at the girl, his voice sounded harder and harsher.

The owner of the house, who now happened to be the miserable victim of the odious scene, greeting them with a *n a m a s k a r*, said to the supervisor, 'Krishnan garu*, what has happened and what is all this about, sir? Now as the knowledge of the present situation slightly came to his mind, patiently he brought his cot, arranged it near them and solicitingly said in a low voice. 'Please be seated and I will explain my condition. Then you will not be as angry as you are. Be kind and considerate towards poor farmers like us.

The supervisor, little satisfied with these words, sharply retorted, 'A month before we had sent you the demand notice stating that you should clear off the loan in fifteen days. The last day was over, another fortnight was over; till now you have not turned up. If you do not pay it now, you will be forcing us to create unpleasant scenes. We are, after all, servants of the government'.

Ramayya answered, 'Ayyah, how could I adjust so large a sum in such a short time? I could not get the amount inspite of all my trials. Moreover I had to send some amount to my son urgently and for that I have moved heaven and earth. Hard days are still hardened

* A suffix in Telugu denoting respect.

by the famine. We do not have even rice in the house. In the next harvest season I will definitely pay' !

As he spoke the last words he found words coming painfully under compulsions and his throat was choked with sorrow at his misery and shame at his helplessness

The officer, breathing the obnoxious fumes of power and prestige under the intoxicating influence of pride uttered to the humble farmer with a frowning look. 'You village folk have no brains. When you need a loan, you come to us a hundred times. But when the loan is given, you think there ends your responsibility. It is not your fault. It is our fault and the fault of the government to encourage such loans and sanction it to the ignorant masses like you. You think the loan amount is your grandfather's property. Either you pay or we have to auction. Decide and tell us now itself.'

Ramayya, though he stood firmly on the ground, felt as though his feet were dragged by someone with mighty force and unconsciously his feet controlled themselves to stand still without collapsing like an old tree whose trunk is cut off. He felt dizzy and hardly he spoke. Then Krishnan catching him gently by the arm spoke in a seemingly sympathetic tone, 'Old man, there is no use in standing like this even for hours. I understand your prob-

lems. I pity you, but I cannot help you. Rules are rules. You have to pay Rs. 500 plus interest."

Taking a folio-sized Loan Accounts Register, he eyed at the peon who came there in an instant appearing to have well understood the latent significance of the meaningful movement of his eye-lids and looking blankly in the register, he spoke something to the peon in a low tone and ended thus, 'You know our usual procedure. Go and advise the poor man.'

Their peon whose broad lips became broader with a borrowed smile came slyly very near the farmer, drew him aside and whispered, 'Ramaiah garu, you need not fear, I will help you. Drive away all thoughts of fear for the present. You seem to be innocent. Such things are normal. These are usual occurrences. We should have tact and if we show that we are worldly-wise, we can go on postponing the payment. Don't you follow me'?

These words, packed with comfort and consolation, were to him like drops of water to a thirsty traveller on the verge of death in a desert. Holding the hands of the peon, he said imploringly with a solitary glitter of dim hope visible in his eyes, 'Brother, I will be much grateful to you if you save me from this much humiliating

situation. 'Till today in my life I never faced such a humiliation. I feel as if my head is cut off from my neck. I accept any suggestion of yours'. As he said these words tears flowed down his cheeks from his sunken eyes. The peon coming still closer imparted his divine solution to the eager farmer, 'Such demands are usual. But if you give our mamul to us, all things will be smooth. You bring a surety and the payment can be extended for one more year. Be cheerful; but don't forget to give our mamul'.*

Now Ramayya was asked to bring a surety and his mind raced from one to another of his neighbours. He was much doubtful about it. His friend and benefactor Narayan had just then left the village, informing him that he would come back at about the sun-set. He went to Rangiah, who lived in the adjacent house and who was one among the few rich men of the village and explaining the situation requested him to come and stand as surety, which act of kindness would not be forgotten by him. Rangiah, who, as a matter-of-fact had personally witnessed the situation remaining by the side of the wall in his house unseen by others, even after listening to the case,

*The word means tip or bribe to a peon or an official to get things done.

cunningly remarked that in his life he observed a policy of not committing himself in such affairs, which might drag him into some unwanted muddle in future. Ramayya dragged his fumbling feet to the next street where his friend and relative Doraswamy stayed. The news of his present crisis had already spread in the village and it had fallen into the ears of Doraswamy, who seeing his relative coming silently slipped inside the house instructing his wife to tell the visitor that he had gone to a neighbouring village on private work. The poor farmer, quite unaware of the sordid scheme of his friend and close relative after getting an unfavourable information, sank into despair and his tired feet consciously led the way to the residence of the rich man, whom he hated and yet whom he could not entirely avoid.

Just at that moment Rudraiah came into the street from his house. When he saw all those people he stopped there in front of the hut and proceeded towards it. From a distance seeing the Sarpanch entering his house, Ramayya, feeling a little hopeful, quickly paced to his house. No sooner did Krishnan see him than he greeted him cheerfully, 'Sarpanch garu, receive my humble namaskar. After completing our work here, we wished to meet you. You are kind enough to come to us.

There is an age-old saying—The God whom we wanted to worship and to whose temple we started to go, Himself came and met us half-way.' Rudraiah, much flattered at this rare compliment, spoke in his characteristically majestic tone, 'You are tickling me, Krishnan. On hearing your loud voices I have come. What is the matter?' Turning to the neighbour he spoke, 'I think it is about the loan you have taken. Have you not paid it?'

Then Ramayya came near to him and explaining the present problem requested him to save his family honour. Rudraiah saw the sorrowful face of Parvathi standing near the door. He beheld in her the lustre of her beauty, though fading, and its powers was so mighty that he thought of winning her favour by helping them in this critical situation. He spoke to the supervisor—'On account of the severe drought, the government has extended the term of repaying the loan by one more year. So he gets the right of paying it after one year. Even otherwise I am prepared to be his surety as he is my good neighbour.' Hearing these comforting words, Ramayya, thinking that the rich man came to him as an attendant angel to help him in this fix, answered in a tone full of gratitude, 'It is very kind of you, Rudraiah. Your kind gesture has brought immense relief to my heart. You have protected my family

honour, which has been placed in peril. This is a great timely help which we can never forget. Our debt to you has been increased by this kind gesture of yours.' Rudraiah, passing a searching glance at the fair woman, answered : 'Ramayya, you are praising me. What great help have I done to you ? If we do not help each other like this, how can we survive in a village ? No one among us is self-sufficient, My help to you is only on human considerations '

Saying these words he turned to the supervisor who placed before him a register and an application in which he signed, and after signing it as a surety, he left the place throwing hungry looks at the woman of the house whose eyes were filled with a deep sense of gratitude.

After the departure of the Panchayat President, the peon came forward and reminded Ramayya of his promise. In a state of helplessness he went inside the house, took out thirty rupees from the amount which he had just now borrowed and tied near one upper end of his waist dhoti and gave it to the supervisor. While the officer seemed looking into a file, Krishnan said to the farmer, 'This time we are excusing you out of our regard for you. Our officer is kind enough to extend the period of repayment of your loan by one year. Hence next year by this time you have to pay it without fail.'

The poor ryot heard these words, but he did not like to speak. After shoving the amount in the pocket, the supervisor along with his office people left the place.

At that moment when the inmates of the house could not devote their attention to any other work, the loud cry of their hen was heard. By the time Parvathi came there, she saw the hen flying in vain to the height of a tree pursuing a black eagle that had cunningly snatched away a little chick. The disappointed hen, bereft of her young one, came down to the ground after her futile attempt to chase her callous foe and all the remaining chicks took shelter beneath her warm wings.

Seeing them gone, Ramayya sank on the bare cot and recollected the time when he took the loan from the supervisor and the trials and troubles he faced before it was sanctioned. Three years before when he had to admit his son in the college, he had not a paisa in his hands and when he was so hard-pressed, the village-teacher advised him to approach the Rural Bank. Accordingly he went to Srigiri on one evening, found out the office and talked to the supervisor Krishnan who asked him to come and meet him in the house next day. Next morning he came to his house, explained his need for the loan and requested him to sanction it early. The supervisor appeared to be busy,

yet he heard his words. Ramayya found him talking to twenty persons at a time. He turned to the other man and assured him of sanctioning the loan in a week and asked him smilingly to bring two logs of wood needed for the construction of his house. Then he turned to a merchant, who happened to be a dealer in cement and who came for a bigger loan and asked him to adjust somehow twenty bags of cement, for which he never gave the price. Ramayya, who sat on the bare floor waited patiently for nearly a couple of hours and when three fourths of the crowd had gone, he asked the supervisor again whether he would help him.

Krishnan, seeing the crowd thinning away, answered to him that he would sanction his loan for five hundred rupees as early as possible, in spite of his busy work and the usual redtapism in the head office. Talking in a tone of familiarity he told the ryot that in a town like Srirangapatna getting firewood had become a regular problem. Ramayya humbly heard his talk and as an innocent man he doubted why the official asked him to bring somehow a cart load of firewood in a week as his village was very near the forest. Later the farmer came away to his house in the hot sun round about noon. Exactly a week after early in the morning of one day he went to the nearby forest

taking along with him four coolies and by the afternoon they had cut a cart-load of wood, which was arranged to be brought by means of a cart late in the night, lest they should be caught by the forest officials. He paid fifty rupees to the coolies and towards the cart charges. Though he had already greased the palms of petty forest officials, yet he feared the higher ones and so late in the night cautiously and stealthily he drove the cart drawn by two bulls through the narrow path in the wood and by the time the cock crew, he reached the house of the supervisor who rubbing his slumberous eyes cheerfully greeted him. After unloading the wood in the backyard of the house he got assurance from Krishnan that his loan would be quickly sanctioned in a couple of days, he drove back the cart to his village. It was almost day break.

He awoke from the reverie of the past deliberately severing the chains of past events entering his morose mind spontaneously. Still the present was too strong to be shaken off. As he thought of the people in the village, his heart sank. In the moment of crisis, they shirked him and deliberately deserted him. Knowing fully well that he was a man of integrity and self-respect, neither Rangaiah nor Doraswamy came to his help. As a matter-of-fact

almost all the villagers were of the same temperament and more often than not they rejoiced at the misery of their neighbour. A few people showed lip-sympathy and even that became a rare commodity with others. This was neither new nor strange to him, for it became quite a common feature of the modern village. Not because they did not want to help him, but because they could not tolerate the son of a poor farmer become a graduate whereas their children inspite of their prosperity did not show any progress in studies. If Suresh, after his academic success, got a job and settled well, they would not depend on other for food and clothing and they could be self-sufficient, some how making their both ends meet. The well-to-do people of the village, who mostly considered themselves respectable with their usual narrow-mindedness had a general fear that if Suresh became employed they might not care for them and they might even ignore their presence. The very thought of this probability was frightening to them and so they did not want to see any poor man prosper in life.

Even after considerable thinking, Ramayya failed to grasp anything why the Sarpanch had so easily extended his help, and Rudraiah's unexpected act of kindness was an enigma to him, which he could not solve.

At last the stray phantom of smile shone on his face when he thought of his beloved son Suresh, for whose sake he was prepared to drown himself in debts from which within a short time he would lift him into a realm of joy and bliss.

(6) It was evening and the sun had travelled too far in the west. The road leading to Siripalle village from Srigiri Railway station was a zig-zag one, covered on both sides with trees. The trees alongside the road were mostly tamarind or banyan or margosa trees. On both sides of the tar road, which raced like a black cobra, could be seen several mango groves full of ripe yellow fruits and tall green leaves. The boughs of the trees on the two sides of the way had so interlaced and intertwined that it appeared as a continuous green canopy covering the way. The road was practically deserted except for a few stray travellers. A shepherd, who wore a loin cloth around his waist and thin cotton towel on his shoulder, drove his flock of sheep which had monopolized the entire road. He held firmly in his hand a long bamboo stick to the one end of which was tightly tied with a metallic wire a curved hatchet, with which he frequently plucked from the top branches of the trees many tiny green boughs with green leaves, which as soon as they fell on the road were greedily

chewed and swallowed by the sheep and goats. The cow-herds walked slowly on the road driving their cows and oxen after grazing them in the forest as the pasture grounds at the outskirts of the village were also occupied by the people. Some of the cattle walked past where as some others lingered on the way when their eyes were drawn to a patch of grass. Besides them a few coolies, not more than five or six in number, walked tiresomely after their day's labour to reach their homes.

At a short distance, as the darkness gradually spread its black curtain on the region, the shadowy figure of a young man dressed neatly in an uptodate manner journeyed towards the village with hurried steps, carrying an old trunk in one hand and in the other a bundle covered with a carpet and securely fastened with a thin rope. As his desire to reach the village grew intense, the luggage, too heavy in its nature, made his steps unsteady and at every step he seemed to stagger. The strong wind blowing helter-skelter gave him immense relief, when the beads of sweat forming on his body were chilled with the wind. As the night grew dark, the way was engulfed with nigritude which seemed to mock at the electric lampposts without bulbs on the road. Except for one or two bulbs dangling in the air and sending a shimmer of inadequate light, all the rest were

broken. The lone traveller confronted with darkness, seemed to ponder in himself of the glaring contrast between the life in the town and that of the village. He thought it a pleasure to walk in the nights in town as the way was throughout illumined, whereas walking in and around the village was a risk, beside darkness the way would be frequently visited by all sorts of snakes and centripedes. He thought conditions in the village did not change much.

With his mind full of such thoughts he entered the village. His heart throbbed with an-indefinable delight, in an uncertain way, as his feet touched his native soil and as he heard the voices of its inhabitants. Some of the houses looked so bright with electric lights that darkness was afraid of entering their portals, whereas the existence of the majority of the houses could not be felt unless one entered them which were dimly bright with kerosene lamps and oil lamps whose open wicks dangerously danced to the tyrannical tunes of the wily wind. As he passed through the street, he saw in its corner six to seven 'big men' of the village conversing, nay, conspiring on the elevated square platform spread with evenly arranged massive stones and in its centre had grown a fairly huge peepal tree whose rustling leaves provided an inexhaustible stock of fresh air

to the people sitting and relaxing beneath it. At last his steps eagerly touched the threshold of a thatched house. Parvathi, who had come near the cow with a small vessel with the intention of milking it, saw him at the door and with abundant motherly affection, dropping the vessel on the floor, approached him with a series of inquiries and at the same time announcing his arrival. 'Oh, Suresh has come. Santhi, come out and receive your brother. My son, you are very much tired. Why don't you drop a letter before? Your father would have gone to the station and shared the luggage. Come in, come in.' Looking at him in the dim light of the kerosene lamp fixed to the wall by a nail, she continued, 'Oh, Surie, you are reduced to half. Have you taken your food regularly in the hotel or not? Hotel food is always the dirty stuff.' Suresh, relieving himself of the burden by quietly placing it on the floor in a corner inside the house and relaxing himself by putting on a dhoti, said, 'Amma,* you speak out of your affection. I am quite healthy, as you see. When we leave our house, how can we expect such food as we get at home? Especially in a place like Tirupati with its countless pilgrims daily visiting and leaving, what kind of stuff do we expect?' Then he turned to his sister who was at the time listening

*A Telegu word for 'mother.'

attentively to every word that emerged from her brother's lips and who had suppressed her boundless joy on seeing her brother arrive after a period of a few months in spite of the fact that he had come there at regular intervals during the period, and spoke to her, 'Hey Santhi, what has happened to you and to your lively spirits? You seem to be morose as though the world has come to an end.' Touching her head tenderly with his hand, he added, 'Be cheerful. You need not worry. Our troubles won't last long. Soon we will find a suitable bridegroom to you with whom you will joyously fly away and forget us.' Santhi, feeling really tickled with the words, turning her bright face aside, spoke in a tone that mingled gaiety and shyness, 'You naughty brother, are always your usual self in teasing me. How could you be away from all of us for such a long time? You would have spent quite happily there in the town with its colourful life. Jyoti remembers you every day.'

Her words were interrupted by the entrance of their father, who had gone to get enough number of ploughs and coolies for ploughing of his land, for plucking the seedlings the following day and for transplanting them the day after. As he saw his son, with waves of joy rising in his heart he spoke, 'I hope you did well in your

examinations. Oh, you seem tired. Go and have your bath ; and take your food. You can talk afterwards.'

Soon Suresh went and had his bath with hot water which largely relieved him of his fatigue. His mother added, 'Hurry up, Surie. Your favourite dish brinjal curry is awaiting you ; Suresh eagerly followed his mother.'

That night as he stretched his body on the mat spread on the floor outside the house, he pondered over the state of his mind during the previous night. He had spent his last night after the fretful fever of the examinations there in the town in the rented room along with his friend who was a class-mate of his. It seemed to him as if the peace and calmness had at last prevailed over his mind. He had written examinations well and he hoped that he would come out in flying colours. He thought of the future, which did not appear to him altogether dark, for he hoped he would surely be appointed in a decent post. When he thought of his village, his spirits drooped. He reflected, 'Can I ever be successful in changing the sordid state of affairs in the village ? It badly needs thorough cleaning of the minds of the people there and I shall divert all my energies in weeding out the unwholesome tendencies. In ancient times, village was considered as a symbol of goodwill and

cooperation, whereas in the modern times it has become a hot bed of rivalries, jealousies, pride, lust etc.

How long should such an inhuman state of things continue ? Will there be a time in future when such deep-rooted evils would be extirpated ? For generations this process is continuing without any break.' He thought of Rudraiah and his vicious circle of supporters. The thought of Rudraiah brought into his mind the pleasant and comforting image of his daughter Sandhya. He again reflected, 'Her figure and features have made an indelible impression on me. She is so good, innocent and helpful. What a contrast she presents to her crooked father ! He does not sleep when he sees somebody happy, whereas she feels herself afflicted when she finds someone in misery. If I am in the village, she cannot spend a day without coming to our house, a humble hut, and talking to me. Always she helps my mother and sister in their work at home, though they persuade her not to do so. So she is neither proud nor she ever displays any air of superiority. Oh, on the day when I was about to leave the village how affectionate she was, how close she came and how pretty she looked ! That evening when my sister, she and myself were plucking the jasmines, how lovingly she talked to me ! When I teasingly caught her hand, the

jingling of her bangles sent tickling sensations into my heart and as my fingers touched her handsome hand we felt as though we were lifted into the skies filled with fragrance

Her words which she spoke to me in the end when we were together are green in the field of my heart—'Suresh, how can I exist without seeing you for such a long period ? I cannot express my feelings to you ; Oh, I feel shy. My tender love to you, deep-rooted in itself, has now blossomed. Please don't disappoint me. Until you stand on your legs, I am prepared to wait.' How good she is ! Unlike her father ! The long chain of reflections about Sandhya, led him in their train to think of Jyothi. He quietly felt, 'Yes, Jyothi. How can I forget her ! So good and innocent. She fits into my house as naturally as a member of the house. For a man of my situation, it would be proper to invite such a girl into my life. She likes me immensely and what more shall I want ?'

With these recollections, dilemmas and indecision, though he lay down, he did not sleep soon. The innocent image of his sisters' face shone in the dim moonlight. Her marriage became a great problem to the parents. In these days, unless they gave enough dowry, the bridegroom could not be found and fixed. He thought, 'I will be un-

grateful if I think of myself, and until I perform my sister's wedding I will drive away all other ideas from the sphere of my mind. Look at my father. Within a short period he looks more aged in the midst of pressing difficulties. From tomorrow I will work along with my father in the field.' Late in the night, tossed with the waves of confusing thoughts, he fell asleep.

(7) The cock crowed and it worked as an alarm bell for the villagers to get up early and start their routine. Santhi got up and began sweeping the floor of her house and around the house with a broomstick. Streaks of darkness continued to be there and the eastern sky displayed long linings of rose and grey. Crows had already got up and started cawing from the tops of trees and some of them started their early flight. The women of the village had all got up and were busy with their usual work. As all of them swept the dusty floor clouds of dust rose, formed as columns linking the earth and sky and gradually faded away. Santhi and her mother holding vessels in their hands started to the distant well to fetch water. Ramayya, fast asleep with the previous day's work, was awakened with the sound of the vessels. He said, 'Hey Parvathi, it is almost day-break. Why don't you wake me up earlier? There is much work today in the field.'

'You were snoring,' replied his wife, 'in your sleep even at dawn. I thought it not wise to disturb you. If you go now, I will wake up Suresh also.'

'Don't disturb the boy. After so many nights, he is sleeping to his heart's content. Let him be not stirred.'

'With the sound of the vessels and their words, the youngman, disturbed from the sleep and rubbing his eyes, got up, 'Father, I will also come along with you to the field.' 'No. You look tired,' said the father, 'and you can take rest for a few days. Afterwards if you wish you can come and help me in the field.'

'Do not deprive me of the pleasure of working in the field, father. It is quite a nice change from the hard and tedious academic study.'

'Well, do as you wish, if you are particular about it. If you come and work, by mid-day you will take to your heels when your skin gets scorched with the rays of the hot sun. You unite the bulls and lead them and I will carry the plough.' So saying, the father came near the bulls and united the knots which fastened them securely to two wooden pegs under the neem tree and gave their ropes to his son, who, then, with a feeling of joy shouted at them and made them walk fast in front of him. Behind him slowly paced his father carrying the wooden plough on his

shoulder and the yoke with the leather strip on his other shoulder. He asked his son to take a small and thin bamboo stick to the one end of which a small nail was fixed so that he could safeguard himself by pricking the disobedient bull in case it turned against him wildly with its pointed horns.

The street was already busy with the farmers, some going to the field with bulls, ploughs, spades and so on, some in the direction of the woods taking lengthy curved hatchets with the intention of cutting green leaves and bringing those boundles to be used as green manure to to their fields. Before and behind the son and the father, many of the neighbours walked, some hastily trying to overtake others and some slowly as if they cared a fig for the world. Ramayya halted, hearing the sound of his neighbour Venkaiah coming just behind him and crying loudly, 'Ho Rama, stop a minute and I shall join you' Joining him, he added. 'The bulls are not listening to me and when I lead them in one direction they go the other way. Nasty, lusty bulls. Though I beat them till they bleed, they drag me as they like.' Ramayya, with a smile shining on his face, spoke, 'Venka, your bulls are strong. In the field they do devil's work. Donot blame those poor innocent animals. Soon after waking from your sleep, why do you curse them?'

'You don't know how much mischief they cause. You know what strain I take in fetching green grass to these fatty dirty voracious bulls. Next time when a good offer comes, I will dispose them off for any rate. Believe me, I will do it and be rid of their nuisance.'

'Don't be hasty. People like us, once we sell away, can't dream of purchasing them again. Are you tilling your land?' 'No, Rama. Not a drop of water in the well. Sarpanch has asked me to plough his land. If I keep quiet, will this dirty stomach keep quiet? For half a day's ploughing, I get seven or eight rupees. With that we light the hearth in our house.'

For a while Ramayya was preoccupied with the thoughts of his neighbour Venkaiah, who had to feed seven mouths at home. His parents were so old and decrepit that they could not come out of the house. His wife was always a weak and sickly patient having blessed, may it be cursed in reality, him with seven children—two of whom were below five years, the third a reckless rogue practising his hand in little thefts within the house, the fourth an aimless crazy wanderer who periodically disappeared from and reappeared in the house and the remaining three were the miserable daughters of marriageable age. Venkayya, not more than forty years in age, appeared to be sixty with

almost a bald head displaying its former glory in the back with a few solitary representatives of hair, now transformed gloomily grey. Only on rare occasions all the inmates of the house ate sumptuously. A tiny bit of land, not even half an acre, which was his sole inheritance, remained now untouched maintaining its barren virginity, as the plot in general was drastically droughthit. With the wages he earned by ploughing he bought the millet and rice and both were cooked and shaped into round balls of food, viz. sankati. If the quantity was sufficient, each member ate a ball and if it was too scanty, it was mixed with water and this liquid gruel was gulped hungrily by all. A tear or two dropped down unconsciously from the sympathetic eyes of Ramayya. He pitied his neighbour, not because his condition was better but because both sailed in the same boat—sinking leaky boat, what more can the poor people do except showing sympathy to one another? Sympathy is a priceless thing and its effect is wondrous, If one poor man pities the other, the latter will pity the former who needs it most. It rescues the miserable from falling into the slough of despondency.

His chain of thoughts was abruptly served with the talk of Venkayya, 'Hey Rama, you have brought your son also. You don't seem to give the boy a day's rest. Of course it

is good to train the boy in cultivation also. In these days getting a job is not so easy,' Turning to Suresh, he continued, 'Ah re Surie, I wish to see the same smile on your face when you come back from the field. Using plough and spade is not as easy as sitting on the chair beneath a ceiling fan in an office-room and scribbling some balderdash with a pen.' The young man pleasantly retorted, 'Uncle, I assure you, I can do double the work you do. Just because I was away from the village for a short period, don't think that I am alien to agriculture. In a day or two I can be as skilful a worker as any other.'

'I am extremely happy at your words. In these days boys, who go near the gates of the school, let alone the college, refuse to enter the field. If he happens to enter the portals of college, he feels it is below his dignity to work. Any boy wearing pants and a slack wears superior airs and feels it an insult to come near the field. Your father, who has suffered so much in his life, is really fortunate to have a son like you.....' Abruptly he ended his conversation shouting at and running after the running bull which cunningly freed itself from his hold.

Suresh reached the land with his father and his heart sank when he saw the vast stretch of the plateau almost dry. Just a couple of years back, that huge plot, shared

by most of the members of the village, some owning tiny bits of land, some holding large areas, was an endless sheet of greenery with its paddy crop and sugarcane gardens. Now it seemed to be an accursed land, fit to be a burial ground, hot and dry, filled with innumerable openings on the surface of the soil ready to receive the dead and the damned and seal them for ever in its parched womb. Wild plants and thorny bushes which had grown there in plenty were also withered. At the same time, he was delighted to see a few patches of green fields which seemed to be a few cases scattered in a desert. As he looked at his field which had already been ploughed twice with water, his heart brimmed with joy and the wide boundary lines of the field were properly pruned, while the transparent water, in the puddled reflected the blue sky. Ramayya plucked the month old seedlings and fastened securely every fistful of nursery plants into a tiny bundle with a hay straw. Within minutes he was so immersed in his activity that his fingers moved with wondrous dexterity. He worked for half an hour and the sun, peeping from the eastern hills, gradually rose.

Suresh stood still and observed the sun-rise—beautiful and appealing. The sun just rising above the two distant adjacent peaks of hills—the apexes of both the hill-tops,

looked like the blushing face of a fresh young lover in his flush of victory caressing the chaste pointed nipples of his sweetheart. As the fiery ball gradually ascended, the reddish hue transformed itself into golden colour which again diluted giving the impression as though this curious colour change was effected by some superhuman force, childishly interested in exhibiting his mysterious mastery over the multi-phased magic

Suresh, who stood entranced at the ineffable charm of nature, suddenly came to his senses when the loud words of his father, who had brought the bulls under the yoke and started tilling, reached his ears, 'Ah re Surie, come and hold the plough. I will go and pluck the seedings'. Suresh came readily and tightly held the peg of the plough, at the same time shouting at the bulls. He asked his father, 'The other plough has not come so far. What shall we do'?

'Our neighbour Pollayya promised to plough for us. Now it is almost 8 O'clock. That pig of a fellow ate his word. He is a rogue and an ass of a fellow. Though he assured me, I suspected the swine. He never kept his word. Let the other coolie come; he will inform us. Even that beggar has not come till now'. At a distance he saw the coolie coming and shouted

at him, 'You, stupid fool, come so late. Don't I give the same wage as that Sarpanch gives. As a matter-of-fact I give more and he gives less. Look at his field. Already, the coolies there have started the work an hour and a half earlier. Now you come like a lord. You, drunken fellows, have no gratitude. Come and take the spade. That Polayya is a damned deceiver; his plough has not come.' The coolie, supremely indifferent to this usual language, which has become a part of his life, said, 'Polayya had gone with his plough to till the Sarpanch's land near his house. He informed me that Rudraiah forced him to work for him.' Ramayya became extremely angry. He spoke, 'Where is justice? Rudraiah comes in my way and snatches away the plough which should have come to my land. Polayya should have come here. That fat loutish swine has no scruples, yet the pig preaches others'.

Suresh, tilling the puddled field, spoke, 'Should he not have that much of decency or commonsense not to cause inconvenience to others? These are the honourable people in the society and only such people are the pillars of the modern society. Don't bother, father. If we work for some more time we can till completely with our own plough and so let us save the wages which otherwise

would have gone from us'.

Just then they saw Santhi coming and carrying on her head a medium sized vessel which contained their food. The father and the son stopped their work, plucked two green twigs from a neem tree near by, put them in their mouths between the two sets of teeth, crushed the ends into brushes and leisurely rubbed their teeth with those green brushes. They came near the flowing water coming from Rudraiah's well from which it was pumped out by a centrifugal motor. They slightly bent their bodies near the passing stream of water and washed their faces and mouths. Each took water in his joined hands, rinsed it with his mouth, gurgled it rubbing the brushed teeth and tongue with his clean fingers. The coolie also came along with them and all the three squatted themselves near the flowing water. Santhi brought before them the light vessel containing cooked rice mixed with it. All the three men sat on their legs with joined hands. Santhi asked her brother to wait and gave pickles to the other two. As she poured the rice with water into their joined hands, they ate and swallowed it with their mouths. biting the pickle and tasting it at every morsel. Now she turned to her brother. As he had not the habit of taking food like that, she brought separately a round ball of cooked

rice and ragi and placed it in his palm. Holding it in his left palm, he made a small niche in its centre in which Santhi put the mango pickle, spicy and oleagenous in its nature. Taking a morsel from it and soaking it slightly in the pickle juice, he ate it to his heart's content as his tongue felt the divine raptures with the mere taste of the incomparable mango pickle. When all these three had taken their food, the young girl cleaned the vessel in the flowing water and retraced her steps.

Ramayya shouted at the coolie to cut the sides and corners of the field with the spade neatly so that water would come there to form a puddle. Suresh started tilling and Ramayya plucked the nursery plants with both of his hands so swiftly and perfectly that he looked like Arjuna in his work. He attacked his job so vigorously that soon the bundles of seedlings rapidly increased. After an hour or so all the nursery was bundled off and kept outside the boundary. He shouted at Suresh to till that patch of land along with the main field. Soon he found Suresh almost exhausted; so he came and relieved his son for some time. He spoke to his ploughing bulls in an encouraging way patting their backs and touching their tails, 'Hey-pah-pah, Basava and Bhima, you are my favourite children; hey.. pa, pa.'

Basava and Bhuma were the pet names given to his active bulls which he considered to be his bosom friends, who understood his language and knew his every gesture. There existed such an inexplicable bond of affection between their master and themselves that if they bellowed or looked sadly at him, he came immediately to them and observed keenly what their needs or troubles were. Even in the odd hours of night, when he was asleep, if any of the bulls made light bellow or a slight sound, he woke up at the instant and approached them with inquiring looks and gestures. The two bulls looked so alike that except their master others were constantly confused in distinguishing them. Between themselves they lived in an affectionate, amicable, cooperative and peaceful terms. For Ramayya they were like his two children.

A short time after midday he released the bulls when ploughing was completed. He asked his son to go home and send food for him to the field and the coolie also left. The thick drops of puddle had adhered to his skin and to the bodies of the bulls. He led his bulls to the nearby well of Rudraiah and cleaned their bodies to his heart's content with the crystal clear water pumped out from the well. Leaving them freely to graze patches of grass atudded here and there in the field, with his loin cloth

he sat beneath the mango tree which had spread its thick green leaves around. As he sat he saw his wife bringing food in a vessel covered with a leaf

He thought of his married life with Parvathi, whom he married when she was a girl of fifteen years and his mind surveyed all these twenty-five years in which his wife had never complained of the constantly rising graphic curve of their poverty, she received his rebukes as well as rewards with a passive submissiveness and a steady smile. He reflected, how active, how lively, and how playful she was in the early years of their union. They played tricks on each other and teased mischievously. Even in hours of hard work, he did not forget the thoughts of his wife, and the delightful image of his youthful wife made his hard work appear light and easy. When he came home from the field, a glance at her smiling face drove away all clouds of exhaustion and fatigue to the distant shores. In her presence he forgot all his troubles and hardships, they felt their humble hut a blessed heaven in each other's loving presence; the radiant rays of her beloved looks filled his heart with sunny warmth and sunshine, dispelling the clammy clouds of gloom and melancholy.

When she came near and saw him looking at her face,

she spoke laughingly, 'What is it that you look at my face so steadily and constantly as if your looks long to devour me. Both of us are past that age. Past is the only thing left to us.'

She sat by his side beneath the lush green mango tree, placing the vessel on the ground. Sitting with crossed legs, taking the leaf and placing it in front of him on the ground after washing it with clear water, he spoke, 'Parvathi, to my eyes you always look fair and young. Of course we are on the threshold of old age, which has prematurely sapped my strength. We should marry Santhi to a suitable man. It has become a problem.'

Giving herself up to an indefinite philosophical resignation, she consoled him, 'What is there in our hands? The god Venkatesa on the yonder hill should save us. Surely He will shower His mercy on us. We have never wronged anyone. Yes it is already late. Finish off your meal. How withered you are! All the sun's heat is on you. After going home I will send the boy here.'

Silently he completed his meal and spoke to her, 'You, go home. Soon the women coolies will be coming for transplanting the nursery. In the mean time I will go and spread the bundles in the field. In the evening send our

daughter so that she may be helpful in bringing water to the coolies who may feel thirsty.'

When his wife had gone, he went to the field without any further rest, took the bundles of nursery in a bamboo basket, spread them at equal distances in the puddled field. To finish the work in an hour would have been difficult for one man. While the father had been straining himself, Suresh came wearing a banian and a dhoti folded upto the knee. Covering his head with a towel which would protect it from the burning stroke of the sun, he followed the example of his father. When father and son combinedly worked, the work came to completion in an hour. They waited for the coolies to come and work. The time rolled on rapidly and nobody was sighted. In the afternoon they would come at 3.00 P.M. and work till 5-30. Almost an hour slipped on. Then one after another ten women coolies came, though fifteen had promised to come. Ramayya, poor fellow as he was, found himself in a helpless state and turning to a woman spoke, 'Is this all the number of worker's? Five have not yet come. They say one thing and do the opposite.' Turning to them all he spoke loudly, 'Look at the Sarpanch's field there. Already they have done two hours' work, whereas you come surely chit-chatting, as if you are attending a marriage feast. You

have no gratitude. You take higher wages from me, while you keep your mouths shut and take whatever that richman throws at you.'

One of them answered, 'Those five have gone there to work. Rudraiah's paleru came and took them along with him. They had to go quietly without raising their voice. Moreover, how can you compare yourself to the Sarpanch? He gave most of us money on credit. We mainly live depending on his land. So whatever he says we have to do. If anyone of us opposes, he will drive that family away or ruin it.' Again she was bent on her work. Ramayya did not speak and he gave specific instructions how they should do their work of transplantation. He turned to another woman and said, 'Hey, Malli, what is it you are doing? You are planting a single seedling. Suppose it dies, then what should I reap then during the harvest?' He addressed to them all, 'You plant at a time not less than three seedlings. Otherwise I will be ruined.'

Suresh stood on the boundary and supervised their work. All the women coolies, bending their bodies with their buttocks projected upwards and heads bent, planted the seedlings and their fingers seemed to move with an agility that was astonishing to an observer. All of them,

most of whom were quite young, working in a line presented a beautiful picture, especially when the evening rays of the sun fell on their brown skin and their looks of hair danced frequently kissing their brows and eyes, to the tunes of the evening breeze. One of them, asked by her friends, broke the silence, by singing a folk song in a medium tone, which had the effect of making them unmindful of their fatigue and the work appeared light and easy.

Santhi, who just then came with a vessel of fresh water, spoke to the woman that sang, 'Hey, Malli, you are in high spirits. What is the matter? Did your husband buy a new sari yesterday? Your bangles seem to be new. They suit you well.' Malli, the working woman, shyly said, 'We sing to forget our fatigue. Poor coolies as we are, we feel happy even for small things. Contentment is the only wealth we possess.' Then Santhi asked whether anybody was thirsty, and seeing some women coming, she poured the water to them who washing their hands drank it holding it in their joined hands. Turning to her brother she spoke to him laughingly, 'You look so exhausted just for half a day's work. Look at our father; how active he is!' Suresh, teased by her, retorted, 'What do you know about hard labour? It is not walking from home to the field.'

Ramayya interfered, saying, 'Why do you quarrel for no

reason, Su lie ? You leave her and have pity on your sister. She is an innocent girl. Now our work is over. If you want, you can go home.' Turning to the girl he said, 'Santhi, take the sickle and reap the lengthy grass. It will be enough for our cattle to-night.'

When Suresh had gone, Santhi began cutting the grass on the boundaries of the field with the sickle in her right hand. Her tender hand had tightly held the wooden handle of the curved sickle with sharp pointed tiny teeth and went on reaping the lengthy grass in a systematic way uniting skill with swiftness. No sooner did the sun set than the coolies got up like automatons and Ramayya started loudly to the departing coolies, 'Please be considerate in completing the work. Only a tiny bit in the corner of the field remains. If all of you work, it won't take more than quarter of an hour. I am as poor as you are, have some pity.' But the women coolies paying a deaf ear to his plea, silently left the place leaving the father and his daughter. Seeing them all gone, he expressed his thoughts suppressing all his pent-up emotion, to his daughter, 'They have no moral standards. Can't they wait for a few minutes and complete the work ? Look at Rudraiah's field. The workers came so early and though it is late they are not raising their heads. They will work there until the darkness sets in.

It is the cruel man who gets the upper hand, whereas the poor and the considerate are heartlessly exploited. How can we find fault with the rich people, when the poor are being exploited and ridiculed by the people of their own class?' Heaving a heavy sigh, he stepped into the field and added, 'Santhi, after reaping the grass, take the bundle and go. I will stay here a little late and come back after transplanting the tiny bit.' So saying he took a bundle of nursery plants in his left fist and mechanically started the transplantation.

Daylight gradually faded away and dusk descended on the earth. Santhi collected all the grass, which was fairly lengthy and securely tied it into a bundle. Lifting it with both her hands and placing it on her head, she informed to her father that she would go home. Her father said, 'I will come in a few minutes. Be careful while walking through the fields. There may be snakes, highly poisonous.'

'There is dim light. I can go safely and you need not have any fear,' replied the girl and she left the field.

(8) The same evening Nagaraju had come to the fields. Adjacent to the field of Ramayya could be seen the vast plot of Rudraiah in the centre of which was situated a huge well with plenty of water even in that drought-hit summer. A motor-pump run by electricity was installed in it, by

means of which water inside the well was pumped out and supplied to the irrigated lands. The water was so plenty that, after meeting the needs of the owner, it was supplied to others also for rent taking it mostly in the form of produce at the time of harvest. At present, Ramayya also cultivated his bit of land with that water. Though the hire for the water was abnormally high, as it usually amounted to half of the total produce in the field during a crop, the small farmers, having no other alternative except keeping their lands dry, were forced by their helplessness to take water from the big land-lords implicitly accepting whatever preposterous terms proposed by them.

Nagaraju came there more with the intention of looking at the young working women than with the aim of supervising their work. Wearing neatly pressed synthetic shirt and a lungi and having a watch tied to his wrist, he walked to the spot with noisy steps, the noise being increased by the brand-new chappals he wore. Even before he approached the coolies, the perfume of his hair oil had traversed faster and it always acted as a sure signal of his arrival creating suppressed tides of ludicrous laughter among them. Gangulu, the trusted servant of his father supervised the work and in spite of the fact that the sun had set, all the thirty women were still immersed in weeding out the

extraneous matter from the paddy fields. None of them had the courage to raise her head and leave the field even after so much delay. The dreadful silence of their hard labour was periodically broken by the echoing shouts and filthy scoldings of Gangulu, the paleru. As he saw the young master approaching, he greeted him with an understanding smile, 'Raju Babu, you have come here after so many days ; there must be something really special. The weeding is coming to completion. All the women have worked sincerely, In a few minutes they will be going.' Raju spoke impatiently, 'Aa re Gangu, hell with the weeding Do you think I have come now to supervise ? You are here to look after that. Knowing me fully well, you speak like an ass. You have no brain.'

Standing near the women he surveyed all of them and his eyes were feasted at the delightful sight of many young women. In the background of the twilight the diverse sarees appeared to be ravishing to him. Raju was impressed with the posture and he relished the sight of the rhythmic movement of their heaving breasts and their legs bare up to the knee. The intent gaze of his lustful eyes suddenly stopped their general survey and fixed on one of them. Coming close to Gangu, he spoke in a low voice, 'Who is that light-skinned lass in parrot green sari ? Oh, she is quite young and fair with full round breasts and a narrow

waist.' Hesitantly Ganga said, 'She is new to the place. Her parents recently came here in search of labour and settled here temporarily. She is more than fair, she is not yet married. She is shy and reserved.'

The work was completed and the coolies began leaving. With the loud permission of the paleru, they started leaving the field in great hurry. Some of them were mothers who had left their infants at home and they hastened homewards with the intention of milking their children. That shy girl came last with one of her companions. As Raju stood on the way, still focussing his eyes on her tender figure, she with an admixture of fear and shyness hesitantly stepped in to the puddled field and tried to make her way. Smilingly he spoke to her, 'Look at me, you young lass. Don't be afraid of looking at me. I don't swallow you. Have you newly come to the village?'

With blinking eyes she spoke in a faltering voice, 'Yes, we came here recently.'

'What is your name?'

'Leela.'

'Fine. Your name is as your figure. I like you very much. From which place have you come?'

'Ramapuram.'

The young girl was very much annoyed. All the rest

of the coolies had gone out of sight crossing the fields. Gangu who stood at a distance, collecting the weed, looked at his young master, whom he had never mistaken and whose ways he always supported. He saw the woman who was with the young girl and his brilliant mind struck upon an idea to send her away from the girl. He turned to the woman and loudly spoke, 'Eh Mangi, come here Take this bundle of weed and keep it in the shed. I am coming in a minute. Come quickly ; it is already late.' Mangi, who was in her twenties, was tolerably fair and reluctantly she parted company with her young friend. Though she knew the nature of both the men present there, helplessly she moved to Gangu who laughed quizzically at her and taking the bundle paced hurriedly towards the shed. She was annoyed at the safety of the girl and at the same time she had to go home quickly because she knew her husband would be waiting for her with affectionate eyes.

Raju was immensely pleased with the timely helpful gesture of his lieutenant and approved his action with his silently smiling look.

He spoke to him, 'Eh Gangu, you go to the shed, follow her and take care of the tools. I will come presently after making some inquiries with the girl.' Leela, quite unaware of the danger, felt very much worried. She was afraid of

her loneliness and the fast approaching darkness. He broke the silence, "Where do you stay, Leela? I feel extremely happy to call you by your sweet name." 'In the thatched hut towards the east of the last street.' She made a step to move pleading, 'It is already late. My parents would be waiting.' Raju replied in a note of mock-sympathy, 'You are lonely; I follow you. Let us go.' So saying he followed her. They crossed the paddy field and approached the sugarcane field. She moved ahead with an agitated mind full of apprehension.

Moving fast, Raju came before her. Standing face to face to her he looked again at her full figure and drank her beauty with his lascivious eyes. The streaks of darkness that were devouring the last vestiges of dusky light made her appear more beautiful and the cool breeze that started waving just then fanned the flame of libidinous desire in his heart. The sense of loneliness made him bold and reckless. Brushing aside all other thoughts, he passionately hugged her tender body; and encircling her slender waist with one hand and pressing her shoulder with the other, he tried in vain to imprint a kiss on her lips. Panic-stricken she struggled hard in his tight grip, scarcely uttering a word. 'Oh . h . h !' she cried in horror. Struggling hard to release herself, she uttered, 'Leave me; kindly you leave me...I beg you to free me.' Slightly

moaning and loosening his grip, she begged him again. Her words went totally unheeded and with renewed lustful vigour he pressed her tightly to his body. Endeavouring to caress her sleek cheek, he muttered amorously, 'Don't be foolish, my lovely bird. Among all those I have chosen you. You are fine and fair. Be good and be quiet. There is no one to see. Cooperate with me and I will reward you ..You silly girl, if you don't understand, I know how to act.'

He managed slightly to lift her and attempted to take her into the field. With main force he pressed her quivering breasts to his hard lascivious chest and tried to take her away from the way. Desperately trying to release herself from his clutches and making little moans and shrieks she scratched on his hands and shoulders. The greater her attempt the stronger was his grip and the more intense was his desire. At the same time he persuaded her to be submissive and to accept him without any fuss. His very touch was repelling to her and his words obnoxious. Like a bird in the hands of the hunter she felt helpless. He tried to move forward lifting her for a moment and dragging her the next minute on the narrow path. As a last effort, collecting all her strength she pushed him back, which was quite unexpected to him who was on the verge

of evil success. His feet fumbled and in an instant Raju had fallen flat in the damp field in which the weed had just now been removed. As the weeding was just now completed, the water in the field was as dirty as it could be. On the stinking bed of puddled water in the field he lay like a rugged bear that was trapped unawares. Cursing the girl in countless abusive words, he tried in vain to get up, but his hands and feet refused to come out of that Serbonian bog. Leela was out of his reach. No sooner did he fall than she ran like a frightened deer desperately trying to escape from the hungry tiger.

Nagaraju burnt in his heart with rage like a wounded tiger. He cursed the girl in his utmost wrath when he looked at himself. His clothes, which were as white as jasmines a moment before, now were drenched in muddy water. The odious sight of his dress made him feel miserable. His face expressed two distinct feelings of fury and grief simultaneously. At the same time he tried to console himself as it was not observed by any one. Stealthily he went near the well and switching on the motor he swiftly approached the speedily falling water.

Nagaraju felt utterly humiliated. Anger rose in his heart and he could not tolerate the idea of getting defeated by a girl of the labour class. Painfully he reflected,

'What a horrible defeat to my dignity ! How proud, stupid and naughty she is ! How intensely I feel the loss of such a pretty opportunity ! The more she is reluctant the more am I afflicted with desire She is really lucky to have escaped, after having fallen into my hands. No one else has escaped from my grip. Next time I will see the fun.

When he came out with a restless mind full with shame, he saw Gangu coming towards him. Seeing his master in a depressed state, he spoke to him in a soft tone, 'Babu, it is quite strange that you are gloomy. Has the parrot flown ?' Getting no reply and observing his young master's downcast looks, he added, 'Why do you worry about an unworthy girl ? How long can she escape ? She has to come to you one day or other. It is a new bird. If not today, tomorrow you will get your object.' At last Nagaraju opened his lips, 'I have full belief in your words. I know your ability.'

Raju, seeming to be happy, tried to change the topic and coming nearer to Gangu, he muttered, 'Hey, Gangu, what is your opinion of Santhi ? In the evening I saw her in the field. She would have gone by now.' Gangulu, who was slightly taken aback at this unexpected topic, managed to hide his feelings and after a brief pause he spoke, 'She is good if there is goodness anywhere. Her parents are

straight-forward. Though they are poor, they rather starve than beg. She has the same pure blood. Sneering at his words, in a sullen voice Raju cut his speech, 'You stupid fool, I don't want to listen to your testimonials. Don't be unnecessarily eloquent in your praise. It does not serve any purpose. Come straight to my point. Since a long time I have been craving for her. She is so good and pretty. What is the use of my living if I don't have her at least once?' 'Babu, don't be hasty. You have no experience. If you are hatching any plan regarding her, kindly drive away such ideas. You may get into trouble ; you may become unpopular. Moreover beware of her brother.' 'Stop preaching, you timid fellow. I know my plans and I can guide myself if necessary.' After a short pause he added having a little softened, 'I just wanted to know your ideas about her. Of course I shall wait patiently until chance sits on my lap. Let us go.'

(9) It was Sunday. Narayana, after completing his breakfast, came to the house of his friend, who was sitting in front of the house. As he came he observed the place and the people there and felt greatly annoyed looking at their blank faces, who seemed to be relishing their enforced leisure in a lethargic way. Anxiety was clearly evident in his face. On the other stone platform Suresh had stretched

out his body resting his head on the slightly elevated edge and looking at the thin jetting eaves of the thatched roof. When he looked inside, he saw Santhi near the hearth in the corner of the house trying indefatigably to light the half-dry sticks with her continual breath. Seeing them living in a state of total disinterestedness, he spoke, 'Hey, Ramaiah, what has happened to you? Have you made any arrangement to receive the visiting party? The boy with his parents may arrive here at any minute. What have you arranged for the midday meal? What is about you, Suresh? Hurry up, Rama.' 'No, no, Narayya. All my rising enthusiasm has melted away. Of course there is rice in the house. But there is not even ground-nut oil for any preparation. Milk is there, but there is neither coffee powder nor sugar. To purchase all these I must have at least forty rupees. Where shall I get the amount? Everyday I go borrowing or begging. Today I could not get a single rupee inspite of my trials.' 'You might have asked me. How should I know that you could not get the amount.' 'Already I owe you so much. With what face shall I ask you again and again?' 'Between ourselves there should not be any such difference. Now, when the party comes they must at least be impressed to some extent. Suresh, you hasten to my house and bring the necessary commodities from Jyothi. All will be well if it ends well.' 'Uncle,

all these troubles have come mainly owing to my useless studies. I am the source for all this misery,' saying these words, Suresh hurried.

As Narayana yesterday told Ramayya about the expected visit of the marriage party, he felt as though the marriage was fixed and he visualised his beloved daughter sitting as a bride by the side of a fair youth beneath the marriage pandal. His joy was inexplicable. He had made hectic trials before to seek an alliance to his daughter. All the alliances, more than half a dozen, did not materialize for his inability to arrange dowry. At the most with great difficulty he could celebrate the marriage. His condition would not permit to do beyond that. He cursed his helplessness, he cursed the callously selfish society, he cursed the senseless Creator who maliciously made him the constant victim of a series of wretched difficulties. This time the proposal of an unconditional visit was more soothing to his sagging heart.

Santhi, sitting near the earthen oven, with tears rolling down her smooth cheeks from her welled eyes, seemed to be a flawless statue of patience. It could not be decided wheather the tears were those of grief or those of disgust and exhaustion. She mused. 'I have become the cause of my parent's anxiety. Their eyes will be a glow, only when

they see me in the wedding dress and their hearts will be light with relief and cheer when they see 'thali'¹ hanging around my neck and decorating my heaving bosom. I fear that day may not come in my life.'

The train of thoughts suddenly ceased with the cheering words of Jyothi, 'Hey bride, where are you hiding? Preparing something or beautifying yourself? Oh, here you are! What has happened to you, Santhi? Your eyes seem to swim. Your cheeks are wet. No, no, no; too bad on your part. At a time when you ought to be bubbling with joy, I cannot understand why you are so moody. Where is my aunt?'

Parvathi had just then come with certain necessary vessels, stainless steel plates and tumblers and Suresh came with a bag full of provisions. His eyes glowed at the presence of Jyothi. Placing the bag down and squeezing her ear gently, he said, 'Oh, you have come before me. Now I doubt who is the bride. You have to take charge of the present arrangements. Hey Jyothi, what a rare talent you have got in the art of cooking! Your touch is a sweet touch, which I have had the opportunity of tasting.' Suppressing her smiles, she complained, 'Aunt, look at your naughty son. He relishes in teasing me. Where

¹ The sacred token of marriage.

Brahma the Almighty had created a virago to be his prospective wife, who alone can control your son, we have to wait and see with patience.' Santhi, who was until now a passive listener, at last said jocosely, 'Mother, that shrew is now standing before you' Parvathi turning to her son said, 'Aa ri Surie, don't tease the girl. We are waiting for that auspicious day when both of you, would be yoked together. Everything depends on the mercy of the Lord of the Seven Hills.' Then you will be as mild as a tamed animal.' Looking at Jyothi, she spoke, 'Dear Jyothi, you be with me. When shall I have the fortune of seeing you as a member of this house? Now I leave the entire work to you. All the provisions and vegetables are here. The party should never forget the rare taste of the preparations made by you. Your talent we all know.'

So saying she had placed before her in a basket a few brinjals, drumsticks and mangoes and said, 'Cut them into slices with the knife. Santhi will boil bengal gram. Prepare mango curry. Brinjals and drumsticks can be separate dishes. I will bring the oil.'

Hearing many footsteps, Narayana came out and greeted the visiting party smilingly, 'Namaskar, Seenu. After such a long time I have the fortune of seeing you. We are waiting for you with a thousand eyes. The other day when I

received your letter my joy knew no bounds. I think the young man by your side is your son Gopal. He has become quite a grown-up man. The last time when I saw him some years ago, he was just a school-going boy, now he has come to see the girl for marriage. Please be seated. Soon you can wash your faces.' Since they had travelled a distance of twenty miles in a bus from their village, they looked tired. Hence they preferred to wash their faces, hands and feet. After doing that, they seated themselves comfortably on the cot. In front of them on the elevated stone platform sat Ramayya and Narayan. Looking at the party, Narayana said to Ramayya : 'Ramu, I hope you know my good old friend and our distant relative Srinivas. He is the father of this youth Gopal. Get yourselves acquainted with each other.'

After the preliminary introduction Ramayya spoke to Srinivas. 'Till now I thought that you are a stranger. Your words have made a happy revelation. So your great grand father belonged to this village. A few generations are over and all social contacts with your family ceased long back. What a good day it is ! Two old families are again coming closer.' He called his wife, 'Parvathi, come here. Do you know who they are ? They are closely related to you, when we have traced their descent.' Turning to the party

he said in glee, 'You have journeyed a long way : you must be tired and hungry. Please accept our humble hospitality. First you take meals and afterwards you can see the girl and we can talk leisurely. Narayya, take them inside the house.'

In the meanwhile Parvathi and Jyothi had arranged everything properly. Mats were spread on the cleanly swept floor and plantain leaves were placed. They came and occupied their seats and the rice and curries were served. Srinivas, after placing a slice of a vegetable dish on his tongue, extolled the preparation, 'How delicious is the brinjal curry ! There is nothing equal to this.' The teacher in Narayana found an opportunity to display his scholarly knowledge, 'It is the best of the vegetable curries when it is prepared by the proper person in the proper way. I hope you remember the eulogy of a Telegu poet who sang in ecstasy :

There is no tastier dish than brinjal.

There is no fairer flower than lotus.

Suresh laughingly said, 'Uncle is in poetic raptures. Nothing can stop him in such a mood.' 'You young people do not understand us. We aged people look at everything with the spectacles of our past experience,' remarked Narayana.

‘Prepared by my sister here, its refreshing memory will never leave you. Ah ! the last item is the best of all How delicious is this payasam ! That is why the Rajas and Rishis equally extolled it as the greatest of all delicacies. No wonder if the Gods relished this divine dish more than anything else.’

After they had taken their meals, they came and sat on the wooden cot outside. Ramayya called, ‘Santhi fetch water to the guest ’ Santhi, full of shyness gently stopped before them with a mug full of pure water and a tumbler. No sooner had she made her pretty appearance than the searching eyes of Gopal were glued at her. She softly raised her eyebrows for a moment, looked at him and in an instant lowered her eyes. She stretched her hand holding the glass of water towards him and no sooner did he received it than she modestly traced her steps back into the house. His eyes were searching for her and for a moment he imagined her to be still there with all her serene beauty—beauty which was incomparable If anywhere in the world there is beauty in simplicity, majesty in modesty, it was to be seen only in Santhi Soon after their arrival she was dressed in an old but impressive sari.

The purpose of the formal visit of the party was over. Both Gopal and his father had seen the girl. The girl and

her father had seen them but their act of observing was of no value. Everything seemed to depend on the boy's father Seenu who had to give the decision. By reading the meaningful expressions on the young man's face, it was clear that he was not merely pleased with the appearance of the girl but he was more than attracted by the girl this time after rejecting a dozen. Overcome with his natural greed, he turned to his old friend and spoke coolly, 'I think the girl is acceptable to my son. I hope the girl's father has the same interest as we have. Though we do not ask, he has to observe all the formalities. He has to celebrate the marriage. He should give at least ten sovereigns of gold in the form of jewellery to his daughter. In what way am I benefited? For my own part I do not like to take dowry. But in these modern days it has become a part of a decent marriage. One who does not take dowry is looked down upon. He becomes an object of suspicion and humiliation. So, just for the sake of social courtesy, I think we may have to accept a minimum of Rs. 5000/-. I hope you may understand us Narayana.' Then turning to the other man who had been passively listening, he added, 'What do you say, Ramaiah? Of course there is no hurry. It is a hundred-year crop. You can inform my old friend Narayana. He will write to me. Until then we shall wait.

Now, we shall take leave of you ' So saying Srinivas left with his son and the other man, leaving no scope for argument. Narayana was the first to recover from this unexpected mental jolt and with a borrowed smile he saw them off, Ramayya continued to be dumb with his downcast looks.

(10) Nearly a year was over. One day after the midday meal, when he had no work to do, Suresh went to Narayana's house. Narayana had just finished his meal and reclined his body on the huge rectangular plank of the cradle, making himself comfortable on a pillow. Jyothi came to him and said, 'Father, take these betel nut leaves, betel-nut powder and chunnam. I am keeping it by your side in the plate. Take them to your taste.'

Her father, mixing them in right ratio took it and began chewing it. Seeing Suresh at the door-front. he said, 'Come in, Surie. Sit on the cot. On account of growing age, I feel bodily pains. It has become a habit to lie for sometime after the mid-day meal. I cannot have a nap even. Again in the afternoon I have to attend the school. Do not forget your old uncle, my dear boy. Nearly after a week I am seeing you now.'

'I am not moving anywhere, uncle. Father's health is not well. I go to field regularly and I look after the work

Moreover without a job, where shall I go? 'Do not get dissipated, Surie. You donot know how immeasurably I felt joyous when I learnt that you passed your B. A. in first class. Your father's joy was still greater. It was a year ago. He has pinned all his hopes on you.' 'If I am a graduate now, it is the result of your good wishes. Had you not encouraged my father and had you not encouraged and helped me time and again, there would have been an enforced stop to my studies.'

'I have done nothing extraordinary. If I do not help you, whom else can I help? But even at your age, you realized your responsibility. You see in your village there are many boys of your age whose financial background is sound. But none among them has stepped near the threshold of the college. Wealth has made them proud, stupid and reckless. That is why our sages said Lakshmi and Saraswati never go together.' Whenever applications are called for some vacant post, you should apply. The old saying is—trial costs nothing.'

'Daily I go to Srigiri and there in the local library I look into every newspaper. Already I have sent three applications. For the post of a clerk in a Bank, I have written well. I hope I may get interview.'

'Let us hope for the best. But in these days merit is not the only criterion on which the selection is made.

There are various factors, both direct and indirect, which count.' 'Father, you are always pessimistic. Let us wish heartily that he should be selected,' interfered Jyothi. 'What more do I want, daughter? I try to hint at the reality, though it is a bitter one. Oh, Surie, it is already 2 O'clock. I have to start to the school. You can stay here for some more time and read the newspaper,'

So saying he got up, went to the bath-room, washed his face and came back. Dressing himself in his usual teacher's style with dhoti and keeping a white towel on his shoulder he left the house,

Though Suresh had the daily newspaper in his hand, his eyes were fixed on Jyothi. Suresh broke the silence, 'Jyothi, you have become mute.' 'When you have become dumb, what shall I talk?', replied the fair one, whose face shone with a smile. 'No no. It is sweet silence. Your smile is a balm to my worried mind. Whenever I see you, I feel like seeing you for ever.' 'Oh, you have become a poet. Poets are dreamers. Dreams are unreal.' He pleaded vehemently, 'What I feel so I speak honestly. Please do not smile away what all I say.' 'Don't be serious; if I do not believe you, whom else can I trust? We may have to wait for better days. I wish that you should get a job soon. Till then we should wait with patience.'

'Patience is more than punishment ; 'Suresh, moving boldly towards her, said imploringly, 'Please do not move. The longer I see you, the longer I wish to see you. You have invaded my mind. How shall I think of any other matter, when my heart is filled with your figure, your words, your gestures and your movements ' He came very close to her, looked into her face, gently took her hand, lifted it to his quivering lips and implanted a kiss on it It was unexpected to her. She felt as though she was transported to dizzy heights of serene joy. After a moment with a face overcome with shyness she gently released her hand from his tremulous fingers. 'I wish the Lord of the Seven Hills will be kind and compassionate to us in binding us soon in wedlock. You are my life ; you shall be my wife. Shall I take leave of you, Jyothi ?' With the movement of her eyeball, she gave leave to him to go and he walked into the street. It was already 3 O'clock.

When he stepped into his house, he saw his sister and Sandhya talking together. No sooner did the latter look at him than she addressed, 'Surie, you are not to be seen now-a-days. Even when I come to your house for your sake, you are missing. Why, you look slightly changed. What is the matter ?' He replied with a vacant smile, 'Sandhya, How can we exist without change ? I am not

born with a silver spoon like you. You have all luxuries at your beck and call, whereas every moment is a moment of struggle for existence for poor people like us. So it is quite natural if you find some change in my physical features.' 'I thought there is only physical change. Now I see there is enormous change even in your process of thinking. For a moment you just recollect how you talk. There is an upsurge of emotion in it. There is a radical change in you.' 'Thank you for your observation.'

'Santhi, look at your brother. How uncompromising he is towards me ! What exactly is the cause ? Surie, if you grant it or not I have a right to know about you.' Santhi interfered, 'Though you like each other very much at heart, why do you pretend to be hostile to each other ? This is hypocrisy.' Be talking together and in a minute I will be back.' While uttering the last words she had already left the place to catch hold of the running away calf. Sandhya started in a low voice, 'Have you forgotten Surie, all the promises we made previously to each other ? How unlike yourself you are ! Look into my eyes it has become impossible for me to exist without seeing you at least once a day. 'I am so fond of you Sandhya that I am afraid of myself. All my long-cherished desire to possess you will always remain a dream. You know pretty well the nature of your father better than I do. How can a

poor fellow like myself aspire to become the partner of a princess like you ? Yet I know how uncontrollable is my desire to seek your company '

Sandhya gently paced towards him with her brilliant eyes almost moistend. Without knowing to herself tears trickled down her cheeks. Suresh quietly moved towards her. Touching her head with his fingers, he tried to wipe out the tears with his right forefinger with one end of the towel which he had on his shoulder. After a few minutes she managed to speak, 'You think I cannot live without wealth, Surie. With all our past intimacy, this is the estimation of myself to which you have arrived at ! Look into your heart. You know that in your company I shall feel happy even in rags and I will bid adieu to riches to greet you. Of course there will be stiff opposition from my father. No doubt of it. But once we are united, joined in wedlock, he will reconcile to the situation in due course of time.' Suresh wiping her tears and arranging her hair properly found himself in a baffling dilemma. Yet it was a Herculean task for him to dispel the cloud of such a delicate dilemma from the empyrean of his mind and with mixed feelings of pity and respect, vague fear and love, he struggled in his mind unable to resolve the delicate knot. Then suddenly listening to the footsteps, both of them parted.

Santhi, looking at the seemingly cheerful faces of both, said, 'Both of you are reconciled, I am sure. I know fully well you can never despise each other even for a minute.' Turning to her brother, she said, 'By the by I have forgotten to tell you. In this afternoon the postman came and gave this envelope. See what it contains.'

Suresh received the envelope and tore it open. Taking the folded paper into his hands, his eyes surveyed the typed matter. As he read his eyes beamed with delight. He said, 'Sister, this the intimation from the Bank of Madras. I have passed the test which I wrote a couple of months before and now I am called for interview. The time is short. Only two days are left. Sandhya spoke with her brightened looks, 'How happy I am to hear it. I wish that you should be selected.' Hearing her mother calling her name, she left them.

For a few minutes Suresh stood still looking at the receding figure of Sandhya and the vacuum created by her leaving them. He turned to his sister and expressed with a sigh, 'Santhi, I am afraid I am partly responsible for the growing intimacy with Sandhya. But she is so good, so innocent, so pure. I like her extremely. At the same time I think of Jyothi. How affectionate and how loving she is! I adore one, but I love the other. Jyothi is almost a mem-

ber of our family. But with all her goodness Sandhya may never fit into our family environment' I tell you all this because you are not only my sister but my friend too.' 'They are like my two eyes, brother. Both are good, both are affectionate. One is as impressive as the other. Moreover they like each other so much that they know no ill-will to each other. Such is the purity of our friendship.' 'Father has not yet come back from the fields. All his energy is wasted there. Almost a year is over after taking my degree. There is still no chance of standing on my legs.'

He turned to the other side looking into the street on listening to the sound of his father. Ramayya with his loin cloth and towel tightly folded around his head and tied came with his pair of bulls. After tying them to the wooden pegs beneath the tamarind tree, he spoke to them, 'Now take rest, Basava and Bhima. You have ploughed all the day. You are very much tired.' Looking at Basava making signs with his head and tail and talking to his kind master in his unintelligible language, intelligible only to his guardian, Ramayya spoke patting his back and combing his forehead, 'What do you want, Basava? Oh, are you feeling hungry? Wait a minute.' Entering the house he brought in a bucket some gruel and powdered groundnut cake, Placing it before Basava and mixing it he spoke, 'Take this,

my friend. This is the only food I can serve you. I cannot give you better stuff than this. My means is limited.' Seeing the contents exhausted, he poured water in it and the bull emptied it and looked at his master gratefully. Now he took the bucket to Bhima and repeated the process. As the bull emptied the semi-solid stuff, he sat by his side stroking the tiny hair on his forehead.

After completing this he washed himself and entered the house. Santhi greeted, 'Father, there is glad news to you. My brother is called for interview.' The father turned to the son, 'Hey Surie, is it true? My dreams are nearly fulfilled. May the God's grace be on us. When should you go? Where will it be conducted?' 'The time is short, father. Tomorrow I have to start to Madras. Day after tomorrow i. e., on Monday, I have to attend the interview. If it completes early, I will come back. We have to meet part of the expenses. It may cost nearly fifty rupees.' 'Don't worry about the expenditure, I will ask someone and try to adjust. Again I am going to the field. Your mother has mowed the grass. I will go and bring the bundle.' He left at once. Santhi collected the soiled clothes of her brother mixed up with useless rags in the bamboo basket. She went to wash them for her brothers' Madras journey.

After some time feeling somebody standing behind her, she turned her head and laughingly she spoke to the other who too chuckled with laughter. 'Oh, it is you, Sandhya. I thought it is my brother. What urgency has brought you again so soon?' 'Why are you washing, Santhi? What has happened to the dhobi?' 'He had taken a bundle of clothes nearly a fortnight back. He is too reckless.' 'Is it so? But he comes to my house for clothes on alternate days and brings them back after washing them the same day.' 'Therein lies miracle of wealth and power.' 'It may be true, Santhi. But it is too mean on their part. Almost in every village it has become like that. The workers and the coolies apply double standards.' 'We are used to it. We know only one thing—what cannot be cured must be endured.' 'Santhi, Surie has to leave tomorrow, as you have said. Is money adjusted? I have with me a little amount. Please take it and give it to your brother. Why do you stare at me? We are always friends and there should not be any hesitation or prejudice. Donot feel shy. Surie may hesitate to take it from me. He may take if you give it to him.'

Surie had just then come there to see whether his clothes were washed so that he could take them and hang them on a rope. He spoke in a pleasant way, 'Always my thanks to

you, Sandhya. But I do not like to take money from you. You yourself are a dependant and you have to depend for everything on your father. In such a case it is not good to take from you. Please do not mistake me. I request you not to get offended. Forgive me, my dear Sandhya.'

Sandhya stood there looking into his eyes with her heart brimming with painful feelings. Santhi now intervened, 'Brother, don't be naughty. You need not take it as alms. Think you are borrowing the amount. You can repay it when better days come to us.' She took the amount from Sandhya and thrust it into his hands.

Parvathi had come there. Seeing all the three young people, she spoke in a happy tone, 'It is a rare sight to see you three together. What kind of conspiracy is going on? Sandhya, my child, what has happened to you for the past one week. You have not come here at all. Sandhya is always a pretty good angel. Santhi, take her into the house. Your father has come.' But Sandhya just smiled and took leave of them, saying, 'It is getting dark. Tomorrow I will come, auntie.'

(11) It was Sunday. Rudraiah was busy as usual with his multiple projects. He called Gangulu and said, 'Hey Gangu, I am going to Hyderabad today by Rayalseema

Express. I have to attend certain court matters there. Moreover our M. L. A. is there to receive me and help me. You have to take care of the fields. If there is any need of your help in the house and if my wife gives you any work, do it promptly. Do you understand? Moreover tomorrow the Paddy crop must be harvested. You should be watchful.' 'Ayya, I will do as you say. Always I am at your beck and call. Your word is Veda for me. In your absence I will obey her orders. You need not have any doubt. So, today after midday meal, you are leaving to the city?' 'Yes, I will be back within a week.' 'Hyderabad is a big city, I heard. Full of palaces, beautiful houses and beautiful women. Is it so?' 'Of course. Everything can be available. Money can buy anything—from intoxicating drink to intoxicating damsels. You fellow, what do you understand? Millionaires come there. Spending a thousand a night is nothing for them.' 'A thousand a night! Oh my God! If only I have that amount...' 'Don't be a fool to dream of such things.'

Their talk abruptly ended when Rukmini came there. She did not like him to leave the place for the situation demanded greater responsibility and prompt vigilance. She said to her husband, 'The coolies are waiting outside for wages.' Rudraiah answered, 'Rukku, you stay here with

me for a few minutes I have to talk to you. Gangu will disburse the wages to the coolies.' Gangu left them taking the amount. Rudraiah came close to his wife and catching hold of her hand took her into his embrace. She said gently, 'Though you are becoming old, your desires are still young. If anyone sees us, they may laugh at us.' Freeing her he said, 'For four or five days I will be absent. Urgent court matters are driving me to the city, You have to look after everything within the house and without, You have Gangu's help. Take care of Raju and our dear Sandhya.'

'You ask me to take care of Raju, even after knowing your son fully well ! When he does not listen to you, how can you expect him to listen to me ? Your wealth has spoiled him.' It is true But it is too late. If I scold him severely he threatens me of leaving the house or demands his share of the property. Somehow, we have to put up with him. Anyhow he is our only son, isn't he ? At least for that we have to tolerate his growing nuisance.

After taking his midday meal, he dressed himself and left the place with a medium-sized suitcase, after informing to his wife and daughter. Gangulu took the suitcase, carried it along with him to the bus-stop. Both the master and the assistant waited for over two hours, but

there was no sign of the bus. He cursed, 'Aa re Gangu, there is no hope of the bus coming, It should come at 12 noon. It is already 3 p. m. The Express train starts exactly at 5 P.M. If I do not catch it in time, all my plans will get spoiled. I have already reserved the seat. After sometime Gangu shouted joyously, 'Ayya, see the rising dust. It is the bus ; sure it is the bus.'

Soon the bus came and when it halted Rudraiah got into it. He got down at Tirupati and entered the Railway Station. It was nearly 5 O'clock. He thought about Hyderabad.

He thought, 'What a delightful city it is ! Really it is the abode of pleasure and pleasure-loving people. Ah ! the posh hotels and the night clubs ! The Hotel Elysium, where I stayed and lodged last time is really a heaven on earth. Even simple tea is served by sweet and comely girls What a delightful experience it was last time ! If there is heaven anywhere it is certainly there. Some teen-aged girls in sarees, some others in gaudy pyjamas. What a pleasant company it was ! That club—The Continental Club ! Can I even forget it ? No. To enter it is a privilege. Moreover my friend the Managing Director of the world-famous Venus Textiles Corporation has invited me now. Last time it was he who introduced me into it.

It is a rare sight—clinking wine glasses, tender hands with the jungling sound of the bangles—daintily dancing damsels—Oh ! When shall I step into that 'Swarga'? Rekha may still be there. Last time it was she who gave me company for three days and nights. It is for her I am making this trip. I am dying to see her, to have her, to possess her.

In the house Rukmini waited for her son. Even after considerable time in the night Raju did not come. Sandhya came downstairs and saw her mother alone there. She asked the latter, 'Mother, has my brother come? It is already late.'

'He has become a big nuisance. Your father does not take care of him properly. He has spoiled the boy.' 'Both father and yourself are responsible, are not you? Till recently you shielded him ; now he does not care for you too.' 'Everyone finds fault with me. What wrong have I done? Had I not given birth to him, I would have been happy. I would have been content with two daughters' After a brief silence, she spoke again, 'Talking about him is waste of breath. Sandhya, come and sit. Your food is becoming cold.' Silently Sandhya finished her meal. She went to her room and with her mind full of disturbed thought of Surie, she fell asleep.

Gangu came late for his meal, as he was busy and restless in the field. While serving rice to him Rukmini asked, 'Today you are late, Gangu. You must be hungry. Eat to your heart's content I will serve leisurely. There is nobody to see us.' Gangu with hungry looks replied, 'Of course. My master will not come back for a few days. How fortunate we are to have this beautiful dark night for ourselves. After so many days we are getting this precious chance. Even at this stage you look so beautiful.'

‘Gangu, do not flatter. Finish your meal and we can go inside,’

Immediately after taking his food Gangu followed her into the bed room. They looked at the door and confirmed that none had seen them. She bolted the door from inside the room and approached the bed. Gangu's timidity vanished. His pent-up emotion found a way to its release. His hidden desires suddenly turned ablaze. He caught hold of her, lifted her and placing her on the bed embraced her. At the same time he spoke, 'I am always fond of you. I whole-heartedly serve you and your husband. He has implicit faith in me. That is why at times I hesitate to touch you.' 'Do not talk all nonsense, Gangu. He rarely comes to me. He wants the company of other women. The day he comes to me is a festival for me. If there is any pleasure

for me, it is only in your embrace. Oh dear Gangu, give me the bliss '

Late in the night, when she had fallen asleep, he came out exhausted with fatigue. He went outside and slept in his usual place.

Early in the next morning, the mistress of the house woke up and awakened Gangu and said, 'Today the paddy crop is to be harvested. You bring sufficient number of coolies, both men and women. By midday the harvest must be over. In the afternoon it must be beaten and all the paddy must be brought here in the cart.' 'Leave the entire work to me. You need not worry.' So saying he left.

At midday Raju came. His clothes were soiled, hair uncombed, skin thick with sweat. He entered the house as if it were a hotel, having no attachment with the inmates. An air of recklessness was quite obvious, Sandhya asked, 'Where were you gone, brother? Last night you were absent. Our father has yesterday left for Hyderabad. Look at your figure in the mirror. You will be horrified.' 'Can't you keep quite? I am damn tired and hungry. First let me have my bath.' His mother who came there spoke curtly, 'What else can you do? Going to town with pocket full of money spending it on loose things and returning home in a dissipated mood. It has become

common to you. Long ago you bade good-bye to studies. You don't show any inclination to do some profitable work. Even at this age if you don't realize your responsibility when will you know? How can you come up in life?' In a sullen manner he blurred out, 'Don't speak as though you are perfect and faultless.'

The mother could not do anything except staring at the revolting son.'

In a few minutes he came in a refreshed mood. The mother silently served rice in separate plates both to her son and daughter. He finished the meal and stood up belching. His mother said, 'O re Raju, at least this afternoon you go to the field. Crop is harvested. Coolies have reaped the crop. Before sun-set. entire paddy is to be brought home. You simply stand there. Gangu is there and he does all the work.' 'Let me take rest for an hour. Afterwards I will go.' Sandhya said smilingly, 'Without any sense of shame you want an hour's rest, brother. Even if you go to the field, you will be more a hindrance to the workers. In your presence, they work slowly at snail's pace. Going to the fields is a pleasant diversion to you, isn't it?'

Sandhya, thought of Suresh. He had gone to Madras and that same day he would have faced or he would be

facing the interview. What would be the outcome of it? Even if he got the job and earned his own bread, could she be bold enough to her tyrannical father? He would be the last person on the surface of the earth to acquiesce to such a match. She was always mild and she would not take any extreme decision independently. With her mind full of such thoughts and uncertainties she entered her room and reclined her body on the soft bed.

(12) By the time Nagaraju had gone to the fields, it was evening. The paddy crop was completely reaped and beaten in the centre of the field. A hillock of grain was formed. The men coolies filled the paddy into jute sacks. The bullock cart came and went, came and went many a time fully loaded. Gangu, the sordid supervisor, constantly shouted at the workers to do faster. Suddenly the bamboo container filled with the grain fell on the ground from the grip of a middle-aged woman. Using all the foul language, Gangu flew to her and kicked her on the buttock. She lost her balance and fell on the heap before her. Her eyes welled with tears and stood like a dumb animal. Afraid of speaking to the fellow, she calmly took up the bamboo container and resumed her work as if nothing had happened. Raju, who had witnessed it, smiled at his confederate with his appreciative looks.

Nagaraju observed at a distance a lithe body mowing the grass in the neighbouring field, where he also saw two old people reaping the ripened paddy field. The fallen ripe crop looked like a sheet of gold spread on the ground. The rays of the setting sun lent an added glory to it. As he crossed one or two adjacent fields, he recognized the old people to be Ramayya and Parvathi, who were reaping the crop. The daintily delicate figure turned out to be their dear daughter, who was cutting the grass.

Ramayya felt exhausted, crushed with the day long work. Looking at his wife, he felt sorry as she too worked along with him all the day. They looked as though they were drenched in sweat. Though she had no strength in her frail body to work still, her will power alone to complete the work made her reap the corn. The husband, as he was born as a male, tried to hide his overpowering fatigue and mustering the last vestiges of failing energy he tried in vain to give the impression of a lusty farmer with indefatigable limbs. The harvest was almost over. His wife heaved a deep sigh of relief and sat for a few minutes there.

Ramayya said, 'He who is above observes all. He alone has to come to our rescue.' The wife said passively, 'Our work also is over. Everything goes on, nothing stops. We could save the wages.' 'Parvathi, you go home. At

home you have no rest. The rice is to be cooked. Anything may keep quite but not this devilish stomach. The mother turned to her daughter, 'Santhi, why don't you come with me? That grass is sufficient for the two bulls. Your tender hands are getting pained. Come with me.' 'Mother, there will not be any grass left to the cow. I will stay and cut for a few minutes so that our poor cow can be gratified.' She looked at her daughter with blank eyes and walking slowly she spoke in a low voice, 'As you wish.'

He said to his daughter, 'I will help you, Santhi. I will cut some more grass and you can go without much delay.' 'You take rest, father. From dawn to dusk you are toiling without even raising your head. I can finish it in a few minutes. You kindly sit for a while.' 'This body knows no rest, my daughter. It gets rest only when it enters the dust. You are really unfortunate to have been born to me, my affectionate Santhi.' 'Don't be harsh upon yourself, dear father. Wealth alone does not make us happy. It is the affection that gives us true happiness. Even in the midst of difficulties, it is your pure love that gives us sustenance. I have become the source of misery for you. Your affection for us is boundless.' 'Suresh would have attended the interview today. It would have been over. I hope he had fared well. I pray the Lord of the Seven Hills

and offer our prayers to Him.' 'Certainly, father. All of us shall go to the Hills with the first month's pay of my brother. Tomorrow he may come. He promised to bring something for me from the city.' 'I know his heart. He always loves you.' Heaving a sigh, he continued, 'Let us start. It is already late.' He collected all the green grass, brought two creepers and tied them into two bundles. He spoke, 'I will bring the big bundle. You take the small one and go directly. I will come rather late along with the bulls. I have to arrange coolies for tomorrow's work. I will talk to them on the way home.' He lifted the bundle and placed it gently on his daughter's head. He took the bigger one and driving the bulls before him he took another direction so that he could pass through the habitations of the coolies.

Santhi walked in the usual way across the fields. Darkness had nearly set in. Except one or two people at considerable distance nobody was there. The thunderous sounds of the land-lords and the grumbings and groanings of the workers had long before come to a gradual cessation. There was no sound except the faint rustling of the leaves and the various shrill cries of the birds which were anxiously looking for their intricate abodes. Crows, eagles, vultures, pigeons and sparrows

filled the sky with their different notes and approached their respective natural hab.tations on various tall trees—banyan, peepal, mango, palm etc. After crossing some of the adjacent fields, she passed through Rudraiah's fields. There was no sign of human life. At last she reached the lengthy stretch of the sugar cane garden. Their sharp tall leaves made a continuous rustling sound as the gust of wind touched them. She quickened her pace while she walked through the way, covered on both sides by the tall bushy sugarcane plantations.

At one end of the sugar cane garden Nagaraju sat on a corner stone. Gangulu had already gone. In front of his mind's screen he saw her life-size portrait. He was sure that Santhi had not gone away. He thought, 'Darkness is setting. She must be coming now. Oh! if that old father of hers follows her, how unfortunate I will be! How precious an opportunity would I be losing! No. Somehow I feel she will come alone. The All-Merciful will not be merciless in depriving me of this blessed chance'. Whether he would be victorious or whether he would face humiliating failure—he wanted to keep it as a perfect secret. He thought, 'I should not miss this unique chance, I am the master of myself now. My father is away. Moreover her brother too is not in the village. Even if anything bad happens, I need not worry.

From his chain of thoughts he suddenly woke up, when he felt the graceful step of the charming girl, whose beauty had already invaded his imagination. He rose from his stony seat and looking at her divine beauty spoke to her in a pleasing voice, 'Oh, it is you, Santhi. It is too late. You are coming alone. Is your father still in the field' ?

Quite surprised and feeling uneasy at the unexpected presence of this unscrupulous young man, she replied shyly, 'I am almost taken aback thinking it is someone. So it is you, Raju. My father too has just left.'

Coming close to her he uttered, 'I am just now thinking of you. Oh dear Santhi, how beautiful you are !' Saying this he took her hand. The young girl, who stood speechless and shocked at the rude behaviour of this young immoral gallant, mustering her strength and releasing her gentle hand from his hold, spoke harshly, 'Raju, have you lost your senses ? So far I had some regard for you as you were the brother of my friend. I never thought that you would behave so basely to me also. Let me go. Don't you feel ashamed of yourself to speak all filth to a lonely girl and touch her' ?

Somewhere in the corner of his mind he was afraid of behaving so to the girl, as she happened to be an intimate companion of his sister Sandhya whose affection for the

poor farmer's daughter was beyond words. In the event of the matter being exposed, he would definitely be the object of his dear sister's scorn who would not spare him at any cost if anything untoward happened to her friend.

A cloud of unknown fear had filled her heart. As the ghostly traces of dusky light had vanished, her eyes were fear-stricken and her tongue turned dry. Without her knowledge her hands let the bundle on her head fall unawares. In spite of her struggling thoughts to run away, her feet failed to move a step forward. She found herself terribly weak as if her blood had frozen. But after a moment mustering all her strength, she cried in a tone choked up with a mighty malevolent mass of mazy feelings: 'Please go away. Why do you block my way?'

The words refused to enter his ears. His eyes were absorbed in constantly gazing at her pretty figure and lithe body, and it looked as though he drank her incomparable physical beauty with his voluptuous eyes.

Showering a volley of smiles at her, he spoke at length, 'Santhi, do as I say. You are my idol of beauty. Accept me; we can share the bliss. You need not be afraid of anyone. No one is nearby. I assure you absolute secrecy and not a word of it will pass to any other's ear. Whatever you want, I will give you.' He encircled her body around

her shoulders and he began caressing her face. Repelled by his lustful nature and cupidity, she struggled hard to free herself from his iron clasp. With all her energy, she began frantically beating his hairy chest. She began crying aloud. Her low cry could not cross the borders of the field. He lifted her and moved towards a corner of the garden. She moaned, begged, wept and kicked her legs. She was as powerless as a deer in the tiger's grip.

Paying a deaf ear to her shrieks, he stopped near the corner of the garden and placed her down on the tuft of grass. With her sagging strength she made a last attempt to release herself from his iron hold. No sooner did she rise and move, than he grabbed her and pulled her down, tearing her skirt and upper garment. Her last feeble cry melted into the air and it was a cry in the wilderness.

There was death-like silence and the wind, as though it had suddenly become weak and impotent, had become unusually calm. The mildly rustling leaves, as a protest against the elemental forces, had become as quiet as a grave. Nearby a fully grown-up cobra had just swallowed a croaking toad. At a considerable distance where the edge of the forest touched the outskirts of the village, a panther which had been crouching for a prey for a long time, had all on a sudden leaped on the back of a stray cow, struck

its head with all its violent force, tearing its neck asunder drunk the gushing stream of blood and left intoxicated with the grisly supper.

(13) The next day at noon, Suresh alighted from the train at Srigiri Railway Station. He looked at the other passengers who also got down and found none from his place. On both sides of the road were seen rows of tall tamarind trees with huge branches. Suresh began walking fast, holding in his left hand a cloth bag with intricate embroidery work. He felt a little proud at the bulging bag and at the same time he felt disheartened at his not being selected in the interview.

According to any human standard, his performance was good. He reflected pensively—"If I were to be given a second chance, I can never fare better. Moreover the ways of the members of the interviewing board are inscrutable. They sent me the communication to attend the interview. Lo ! all my seriousness had turned into mock-seriousness when the learned interviewing personnel first a fat and burly person resting on the extensive belly and smoking a pipe broke the silence—"Which is your native place?" Humbly I gave my answer. The second person with his huge loosely hanging gills hardly able to turn his neck towards me asked me, "What is the importance of

your place ?” With greater gravity I gave my answer. The third person just said, “You can go.” Thanking them I left their awful presence. I honestly doubt the significance of these questions.

Wiping the drops of sweat on his brow with his handkerchief, he felt a little happy when he looked at his bag. For the first time in his life he had brought a pleasant gift to his sister. With the little money he had he bought a sari of a simple design and of light sky blue colour for his sister who always dreamed to have such a one that would immensely suit her flawless complexion.

As he reached the outskirts of his village, his pace quickened. Two or three people who were on the way looked at him seriously and sorrowfully, and passed by him gravely without opening their lips. By the time he came near the peepal tree, on the way to his house, he saw a number of people coming from the river-side. Narayana was also coming with heavy steps covering his shoulders and back upto the waist with a wet white dhoti. As he came near Suresh he lost control over himself and tears dropped from his eyes. A few steps behind him his father came with wet white dhoti covering his almost quivering corporeal frame. No sooner did the sorrowful father see his perplexed son, than he burst into tears and embraced

his son sobbing. He cried, 'Surie, my son, we are undone. Our Santhi, leaving all of us, passed away. She is no more in this world.' He could not speak further. His throat was choked with profound grief and lamentation. Suresh was stunned and for a moment he could not believe his ears.

Suddenly he felt his sense of thinking failed and he wept aloud. He could not control himself. As he entered his house, he found in one corner his feeble shrunken mother, sorrowfulness incarnate. She had wept and wept, as she saw her son, she hugged him and wept: 'Surie, there is no sister to welcome you. When you left she sent you with smiles, Now she has left us for ever. She took away her life ; her body was found in the well."

Narayana, wiping his tears with his towel, made a feeble attempt to comfort the boy : 'Babu, it is all God's work. You are educated. If you cannot restrain your grief, who will comfort your aged parents ?'

The bag had long before fallen from his hand. He took out the sari from it and walked along the street, crossed the river and reached the other side which was the burial ground, where still the flames continued. There were many tombs which had been constructed over a long period besides countless stones visible on the

ground. Adjoining to it there was the huge mango grove which had grown to be a wild wood. The place was totally deserted. Two tall trees stood as giants guarding the place with their innumerable leaves as countless vigilant eyes. A sinister countenance and their refreshing shade created vague fears. Beneath those trees were seen various things like bamboos, pieces of cloth, twisted hay, burnt wood, broken pottery etc. lying helter skelter. Close to it he saw the funeral pyre still burning with diminished flames. The body was almost consumed in flames. Standing, staring at it and sobbing, he threw the brand new sari into the flames and slowly retraced his steps with his eyes almost blinded with continuous flow of tears.

He found the house as terribly quiet as a grave, intermittently disturbed by the stifled lamentations of his parents. Ramayya struggled to speak, 'Ohoh! she has cruelly left us, Surie. How many dreams had I dreamt of her future? Instead of cheerfully celebrating her wedding, I have performed her frightful funeral. His mother at last opened her trembling lips in an indistinct tone that had been spoiled by continuous mourning, 'Surie, my boy, don't look at the horrid face of this most sinful mother. I have lost an angel of a daughter. She was the source of joy and

delight in the house.'

Surie, who stood as a lifeless statue, staring into vast vacuum, again burst into moaning having lost mastery over his reasoning.

At last Narayan, touching the young man's head with his consoling hand, spoke in a calm and serene voice, 'Surie, the loss is irreparable. Oh, my good God! goodness has no place in this world.' Looking at Ramayya, he added, "Rama, you are weeping like a child. Knowing everything you lament endlessly! With your age and experience, restrain yourself and comfort your wife and inexperienced son. Everything depends on the will of the God above.'

(14) A few weeks were over. The situation in the village was normal and the lives of the people were as usual with no change in their routine. But Ramayya and his wife were still sad and no day passed without shedding their tears. Mechanically they had to do their agricultural work. Suresh now became his father's companion in doing cultivation. Occasionally he went to Srigriri where he could meet his old friends near the local library and forget his heart-ache in the pleasant company of his friends.

Very near the Panchayat elementary school, there was the toddy and arrack shop, which was actually under the

control of Rudraiah. He was the contractor of the arrack shop but he seldom came there. His agent Mallayya looked after everything. Nagaraju would come there now and then to ensure proper functioning of the shop. The shop would be busy during the evenings with labour class customers. Annexed to the liquor shop towards the right side there was a small refreshment stall, where eatables like 'dhose' or 'masala vada' or mutton curry were freshly prepared and sold by Kanakam—Mallayya's young wife. As long as prohibition was there Rudraiah used to sell illicit liquor prepared clandestinely by his workers near the nearby forest and now he sold government arrack along with illicit liquor, crudely prepared by his men.

That day during the evening Nagaraju stepped into the shop. No sooner did he enter the shop than Mallayya stood up and invited his young master. That day being Sunday there were many people near the shop. Some were still conscious, some others were semi-conscious and a few practically unconscious lying in front of the school. Nagaraju, on observing all of them, said, 'Mallayya, today, it seemed there is roaring business.' Mallayya replied, 'It is true. Sunday is the shandy day at Srigiri. After buying vegetables and provisions for a week they come here and buy arrack.' 'If this liquor is not enough, you go and bring

a tin of our local liquor.' 'A large crowd is coming there. Without you and your wife this would never have developed to the present state. Oh ! it is too big a crowd.'

Altogether nearly thirty people, some men and some women, a few with bags and others with baskets were coming from the nearby Srigiri shandy. Only once a week, on Sundays it took place. All kinds of things from vegetables to vessels, from provisions to pottery, from broomsticks to cloth were sold there. All the people from a radius of over five miles depended on that weekly market. Some people from Siripalle were returning after buying necessary provisions in that market. Most of them were from the working class and others from agricultural class. As they walked, they talked on various topics from Panchayat matters to the Assembly elections, from weather forecast to matrimonial affairs. One aged man with his heavy bag on his shoulder said, 'I never saw such hard days, Chinna. Prices are touching the skies. There is no body to control the prices. In my days, when I was a boy, I used to go with four annas to the shandy and my hands were practically pulled down by carrying vegetables and other provisions.' 'In your youth the conditions were different, Peddayya. Now we are not able to buy a kilo of rice for four rupees. If I work whole day, I will get five

rupees. How can I feed with this paltry amount my aged parents, my wife and three children ?' A third person, with a bamboo basket on his head, said, 'We poor people cannot live nowadays in this world. Everyday adharma is growing. Man tears and eats the other man. What is your opinion, Peddayya ?' Peddayya, the older of the aged one, replied, 'It is true I saw the green past and now I live to see the dry present. Life has become so uncertain now.' The third man said, 'Sure, sure. The other day the round hut opposite to the high school was razed to the ground when a drunken driver drove his lorry on it. The wife and the husband sleeping inside it were reduced to a lump of blood and bones. It was a horrible sight.' Chinnayya looked behind and saw Suresh at a considerable distance. He came close to them and spoke in a low voice, 'Do you know the truth about the miserable death of Ramayya's daughter ?' It is generally known she accidentally fell into the well and got drowned. Can this be true ?' Peddayya retorted, 'May be, it is true. Who knows the truth ?'

One among them shouted, 'Let us get ready and drink and forget the dirty world for a few minutes.'

Nagaraju, observing the large group, went inside the toddy-house instructing Mallayya to cater to the needs of

the customers. In the open verandah itself three big pots of liquor were arranged, one containing Government liquor and the other two illicit liquor. The customers sat on the wooden planks arranged on elevated stones. Mallayya was busy in supplying the liquor to his customers. His wife Kanakam was no less busy in preparing dhose and vada.

Meanwhile Nagaraju broke open the sealed cork of a costly liquor bottle and emptied it in a single act of drinking. Throwing the empty bottle he came near Kanakam and sitting on a cot behind the bamboo screen, uttered, 'Kanakam' come quickly with a plate of dhoses.' The next minute she appeared before him with a plate of his choice along with chicken curry. She spoke, 'Raja, this is your choicest dish. I prepared it specially for your sake. Take it leisurely. After a few minutes I will come, people are waiting outside.' In his tipsy way, he smiled at her, took her quickly into his arms, pressed her swelling breasts to his chest and let her go. With a mischievous smile she left.

Darkness was about to set in. One group had left and another group of labourers had come there who were taken care of by Mallayya. When there was brief interval, Kanakam went inside where Nagaraj was lying semi-conscious. Looking at her with his half-closed eyes he spoke in an

incoherent tone, 'Ay Kanakam, your preparation is superb as your face. Well, well...well. Come closer.'

Kanakam answered in a low voice, 'Raja, this is not the time. This is the time of our business. My husband is in shop. You can come afterwards.'

Cleverly detaching herself from his infirm grip, she went out. He too walked cautiously and entered the street, speaking to himself in a relatively loud tone—'I am born to enjoy. I have wealth, I have power, I can buy anything... any woman. No one has escaped so far. If any girl refuses she...eh . h...she will have the same fate of Sa-Shan-Shanti—Eh...hi...hi hi.'

No sooner had he uttered the last words, than Suresh who was coming home from behind beat him on his back with his tightly clenched fist. The strong blow had brought him to his full consciousness and livid with anger and shame and fear. Nagaraju resisted Suresh and tried in vain to encounter his irresistible adversary. Surie, to whom the terrible knowledge of his sister's horrible death had come in all its shocking truth turned fury incarnate. With the overwhelming flood of vengeance erupting in his volcanic heart he kicked Raju who at once had to fall down. He pulled him by his hair violently and gave him a volley of blows. Raju had long ceased to resist and had collapsed on the

The Vultures

ground, when a large number of people of the village rushed in between the two rivals and separated them.

The news had spread like wild fire in the village and with the speed of a lightning Gangu, roaring and waving his stout wooden sticks was seen at the other end of the street running towards Suresh. He flew cursing, 'O re Surie, today is the day of your death. Death is inviting you and that is why you have voluntarily asked for it. No one is born to strike my master and to breathe after that. I have eaten his salt, and I will prove myself worth the salt. You wretch, you beggar, how dare you strike my master's son? I am not Gangu, if I do not break your head!'

The villagers of both the sexes were startled at this sudden turn of event. A few men physically carried Nagaraju to his home. Others, with no loss of time urged, 'Surie, run away. Escape from this beast. Run away or you will die. ...Go away...Go...Go.' But Surie had reached a state of mind that was past all thought and reflection. The gruesome picture of the most tragic death of his most beloved sister, this and this alone, was there in his mind. In no other moment was he so defiant, so reckless and so Herculean in strength. He was ready to face even Siva, the God of wrath and to break his trident that knows no defeat. In a moment he pulled a hard bamboo stick fixed to the thatched roof of the school and stood

ready to encounter the fast running Gangu. Now the inevitable was to happen. Just then Ramayya and Parvathi were seen running and were heard crying—'Babu¹, Surie, run away ; Surie, my son escape !'

Gangu flew past with his up-lifted staff on Surie with the only aim of breaking the latter's head with a single mortal blow. All people thought that the young man's life was finished, but they were surprised to see Surie who had intuitively escaped the fatal aim. Shrewdly he beat the former's staff with his stick with all his might and the next moment it was at the other end of the street. The next moment saw Gangu receiving the lightning succession of blows from the unbeatable Suresh. Gangu, who was startled and shocked at the unexpected reversal of his fortunes, with all the gnawing pain began running ; but Surie chased his vicious victim upto the door of Rudraiah. Gangu, bleeding profusely in the nose, mouth and head, with his eyes almost closed in dingy blackness, fled into the house and shut the door from inside.

(15) Sometime after one day Rudraiah thought as a father, wealthy, powerful and influential, he should support the ways of his son, however wayward, wily and wicked he might be. His judgement as usual was always one-sided

1. a term (in Telugu) of endearment

and his proud and egoistic temperament could never comprehend the measures and actions taken by others.

He angrily reflected, 'Time has come to teach a strong lesson to that young and useless fellow Surie. How bold is that fellow, rotting in the mire of poverty, to strike my son who is rolling in the midst of dazzling prosperity? My right hand man Gangu was also beaten by that unemployed wretch. So far no one had the courage to question my authority. Now this beggar is born to find fault with my ways!'

As he was thinking like this, his son Nagaraju came there followed by Gangulu who was almost recovered. Rudraiah, turning to the latter spoke, 'We have to wait till our chance comes. Whatever we do, let us do unerringly though in the process much time is consumed.' Gangu blurted out, 'Ayya, my heart overflows with revenge. You permit me, I will ruin him and burn his house.' Raju, with a nod of approval, uttered, 'You do it precisely Gangu. You do all that and still more. After putting us to shame, the fellow has no right to live in the world and he should quit the earth. What do you say, father?' 'I want you to keep quite. You don't know what to say and where to speak. You have become a nuisance in the house. I don't know how you would rectify yourself. Now our family

prestige is involved in this issue. Already we are looked down upon even by the low class people. I may be thrown down from this Panchayat Presidentship.' His son, who was not happy with the unpalatable words said, 'Father, you don't trust me. You have no faith in me. In your eyes I am always a child and a stupid fellow.' Seeing his son gone, he said in despair: 'He is grown up in his body, but his mind has not yet matured. We have to change with the changing times. These are the days of the poor. We should wait till our chance comes. Patience has its own reward.' Gangu now opened his lips, 'Ayya, what you say is entirely true. My eyes are opened. Very few people have your wisdom and patience. That is why I accept your word as my law.' Rudraiah, looking at the gate lest someone should come and hear, moved his thick lips and spoke in a low voice, 'Are Gangu, my heart is burning with revenge as yours. But we should be cautious in our work. I want to see all the three inmates of the house starve and beg before they die. Their days are numbered. I shall seize their little land and house.' Asking Gangu to come closer to him he gravely whispered something, then said in a low tone, 'Be careful. Tonight it must be over. After everyone goes to sleep, proceed and perform the work with great secrecy.' 'I know, I know. This is only a simple beginning for a deadly finish.'

His wife appeared with a basin full of idlis and a big cup with chutney. He sat before his plate and swallowed like a hungry wolf all those large-sized idlis along with the delicious groundnut chutney.

As soon as Rudraiah filled his arm-chair with his huge corpulent frame, he saw a man entering his gate and recognised him to be the peon in the Rural Bank. With a smile shining on his lips, he spoke loudly : 'A long time is over since I saw you.' Folding both his hands he said, 'Namaste, Sarpanch garu. To day our bank officers have come on a lighting drive to collect pending loans. Obtaining full powers even for auctioning, our officers have come in a jeep. They are now at Rammaya's. Your presence is necessary.'

'To Ramayya's house ! No. I won't come to that beggar's house.' 'Sure, sure. But owing to official formalities, the officer says that your presence is necessary. Moreover last time, only in respect to your words, he was given time to clear it off.' 'No, no. Last year was last year. Now things are completely changed. Regarding that fellow you can inform your officer to take any kind of action. I don't interfere. Why should I help an ungrateful wretch ? The young cur, the old man's son, has put me to so much of shame. Go and tell your officer that I can't

come. But remember one thing. Before you go, you bring here all of your office people. In the meantime I will arrange for their tiffin and coffee. Don't forget to fetch them.'

In the meanwhile an ugly noisy scene ensued in front of Ramaya's house. The secretary of the Rural Bank began shouting and threatening at his topmost voice to the inmates of the house. Parvathi came out, spread a mat on the elevated stone platform and said in a humble voice, 'Please sit down and wait for a few minutes. Both my husband and son have gone to the fields. I will go and bring them.'

But he was not in a mood to listen to his words. Giving scant respect to her plea, he spoke, 'What is the use of saying all this nonsense. We gave your husband a lot of time. He did not care to pay even a part of the amount. Now there is no use in listening to your explanation and hearing your empty promises. You people have no sense of responsibility. Now I can't do anything. It has gone beyond my hands. These officers will take away all articles including vessels from your house. Nobody can come to your rescue. This is the lesson which you should learn for not keeping the word.'

Another officer who was till now surveying the surroundings opened his lips in a sullen way, 'There is no use in wasting our time talking it away. Let us finish our job soon and go away.' Turning to the peon who had just come back from Rudraiah, he instructed, 'Go inside and throw some of the vessels out. We will prepare the list and after getting it duly signed, we will take the vessels with us to the office.' The old lady with suppliant hands implored, 'Ayya, I beg you to wait for five minutes. I sent a boy. By this time my husband will be half the way home. Have mercy upon us poor folk. Please do not remove the vessels.' Her modest words failed to enter the ears of those proud and vainglorious people. Though she stood on the door step with folded hands, the peon at the heartless instructions of the callous officers forced himself into the house and catching sight of an old huge copper vessel near the hearth, he haughtily lifted it which he heartily put down before the officer with a grating sound.

At a short distance both the father and the son were seen coming fast. Ramayya made long strides so as to come with utmost swiftness, while the son came followed by their peerless pair of sturdy bulls.

Seeing the large vessel dropped on the ground with a crashing sound in front of the feet of the Bank officer, even

Ramayya who was generally mild spoke in a sharp manner : 'Sire, what is it that you are doing ? You have thrown the vessel down on the ground. Immediately after receiving word about your arrival, I have come running to explain my present misery to you.' Another officer said curtly, "More than sufficient time was given. You failed to pay and it is now our duty to seize whatever is available in your house and auction it. You either pay or allow us to take whatever is worth taking."

As the peon brought another vessel which was used daily for bringing drinking water, Suresh hurried to the spot shouting, 'Stop it, I say.' Turning to the officer he said aloud, 'Is this the way in which you discharge your duty ? Is this the way in which these Rural Banks help the poor people ? You are not Government servants, you are devil's servants. We may be poor, but we are also human beings like you. We want the same kind of respect as you want. Don't treat us as though we are worse than beasts. If you are impartially strict and then even if you throw all of us out of the house, we will not grumble. You are anything but honest. You have given sufficient time to the man in the next street and here you are displaying your vulgar heroism.' The officer got wild, he shouted, 'What nonsense do you talk, you young man ? First you

pay and then talk. You are all a set of cheats.' Suresh lost his patience and almost pouncing on the fellow, he shouted, 'You dirty rascal, you repeat your words and see whether you will go back alive.' 'What is the matter?' asked Narayana who had just then come from the school. Understanding the matter, he said to the officer imploringly, 'Sir, you give us time for a couple of days I will stand as surety. I will come and pay it in your office day after tomorrow i. e., Monday. Please consider it sympathetically.' But his words went unheeded and unanswered. The officer putting his last cigar between his thick lips and throwing out his empty cigarette case, said sternly, 'I have come here with legal powers, We have to take something worth about Rs. 800/-, We don't take vessels then. We will take the pair of bulls. We will auction them and the date of auction will be notified in the office. If you want, you can come and take part in bidding and have your bulls,' So saying he obtained the signatures of the desired people and making necessary arrangements for fetching the bulls he left the place.

He was about to get into the jeep, when Rudraiah, standing in front of his house, had invited them. They were all served hot idlis with chicken curry, which they relished to the extreme. The officer who had been hesi-

tating previously to remind Rudraiah about his huge loan of Rs. 20,000/- now forgot that part of his duty and thanked Rudraiah—who happened to be one of the Directors of that Rural Bank—for his generous hospitality.

Narayan sat by the side of this old friend and spoke comfortingly, 'Don't get agitated by this. You are shedding tears ! There is nothing shameful. We are not thieves and robbers.' Turning to Surie he spoke, 'Surie, you go inside and console your mother. She is all sorrow.'

Indeed she sat like a monument of grief. Narayana spoke soothingly, 'Rama, what is this ? You have become a child. If you grieve like this who will console your wife, that poor woman ? If God is kind, in a year or two you can buy a new pair of bulls. Darkness will not be there for ever.' Let us face them with a smiling face with patience and fortitude.'

'You do not understand my heart's agony, Narayana. These two bulls were born in my house. I brought them up with these hands as I did my children. See my dark destiny !' Narayan added, 'who is free from troubles ? Was not Lord Rama incarnation of God Vishnu Himseif sent to forest for fourteen years for no fault of his with his newly wedded bride ? Our troubles are just as negligible as straw'.

(16) Neither of the parents disturbed Suresh in his sleep. Ramayya started going to the fields. Hardly had he left the house when he was met by his neighbour on way Venkaiah spoke to him in an agitated mind : 'Ramayya, O Ramayya, your hay stack is burnt. It is totally burnt. Nothing remains save a huge heap of ashes.' Ramayya could not believe his ears, yet he could not mistrust the words of his honest neighbour. For a few minutes he stood still and in the midst of hardened grief his voice broke out : 'One thunderbolt after another. All my hard-work is reduced to ashes. When troubles come and they come like a series of sharp arrows.'

Venkaiah added, 'It is a shock how it caught fire in the dead of the night. Surely some drunken fellow, going by that way, might have thrown the lighted matchstick or the burning bit of his beedi ?'

Venkaiah came along with the melancholy man to the latter's house. Seeing the husband slowly sitting on the cot, Parvathi exclaimed in a pensive manner, 'What is become of you ? Are you not well ?' He slowly spoke, 'It is heart ache of an unusual kind. Parvathi, how shall I express ?'

Suresh whose sleep was disturbed by their talk, got up with alacrity and observing Venkaiah in a solemn aspect

quickly questioned, 'What is the matter, uncle ? Speak clearly.' Venkaiah, spoke in a soothing voice, 'Surie, your hay stack is burnt. It is the work of the night.' The young man, whose blood began boiling found his loud voice echoing, 'Who has done this foul work ?' Who could be the author of this villainy ? I can scent the fellow. If my doubt proves to be true, I will see his end.' His father admonished him, 'Don't be Silly, Surie. Don't be rash.' His wife, submerged in the whirlpool of depression, managed to utter, 'God is unkind to us. He has taken away hay also from us.' Ramayya, rising slowly from the cot, spoke with a renewed strength, 'Don't be sad, Parvathi. What use have we of hay ? The moment we lost our bulls, the usefulness of hay has become nil to us. Lord Gapala Krishna¹ knows' our wants, He has deliberately deprived us of the dry grass, when he found we let our bulls seized by others before our own eyes.' Venkaiah, with his heart over-flowing with kindness and sympathy, expressed, 'He who has created will show us the way to feed.' Uttering these words of consolation, he left the place.

Rudraiah and Gangulu were also walking that way. Rudraiah asked Venkaiah who stopped seeing the former, 'Is it true Venka ? Poor man ! again in trouble !'

1. Incarnation of the supreme God Vishnu, worshipped as the God of pastoral life.

Seeing two other neighbours Rangaiah and Doraswamy coming, Venkaiah went away. No sooner had he left than Rangiah spoke with an air of contempt, 'Rudraiah, look at that fool Venku. He speaks as though he is the champion of the suffering people. How is it possible that he should forget his wretched state? Is it not fine to see one beggar pitying another?' Doraswamy said laughingly, 'What more can they do? When they cannot give any material help, they are generous in extending oral sympathy. That useless Ramayya deserves all this punishment.' Rangaiah spoke, 'That Narayan the school teacher is another fool. Always speaks as if he is the guardian angel for all the weak and the afflicted. Everytime he is coming to the rescue of Ramayya. He has an only daughter with considerable property. Why should he think of Surie as a possible bridegroom? He can give his daughter to some other suitable man.' 'He encouraged Ramayya to send his son to higher studies. With his foolish ideals he is spoiling many boys of our village.' Rangaiah added, 'Why can't you take his daughter as a suitable wife for your son? What more does that stupid teacher require?' Rudraiah intervened, 'Such a good idea never enters that idiot's brain. You see the teachers of our neighbouring villages. Whether they teach or not, it is immaterial. In our adjacent

village of Thimmapuram that young teacher Balaiah goes daily to the house of the Sarpanch and gives tuition to his children. But our Narayan does not care for us. Owing to his support, that Surie is not at all caring for us. If Narayan continues to be so, we should teach him a lesson. He should not be kept in our village.' Doraswamy added, 'It is a brilliant idea. Long ago he should have been transferred.'

Rudraiah said, 'Let us wait. I will get him transferred to the other end of this Taluq.' With these words he went to his field and others also parted. Ever since the Panchayat Raj came into existence with its elections, even an erstwhile peaceful village in a remote corner of the country is torn asunder in political factions and petty feuds and the modern Indian village has become a cockpit of quarrels, hatred, jealousies, rivalries and riots. Two or three powerful men of the village having monopoly of land and money virtually become de-facto rulers and the villagers willy-nilly have to rally round the one or the other even for mere survival.

Surie had gone to the field. His eyes were sore to look at the dismal sight and his heart ached at it. He sat on the stubble for a long time taking the ashes into his right hand and steadily dropping it on the ground,

As he was about to leave the field, he saw his usual worker coming towards him. The worker came near him and spoke, 'Ayya' what a grave mischance has taken place ! An evil man's work.' 'All your houses are near to this spot. Have you seen the burning light in the night ?' 'No, no. After taking food we slept. All the day we work. In the night as soon as we lie we fall asleep. We will be like dead bodies. Only in the morning we saw this when we came here.' 'Some miscreant has done this devilish deed. One day or other truth may come out. It cannot be hidden for long.' 'Sure. God will surely punish that evil-doer.'

There was a brief silence and Surie leaving his worker there, walked homewards. He reflected, 'Is there really a God ? If he is really there, why should He delight in destruction and in dark and devilish deeds ? Or has He become a helpless spectator to cruelty and callousness reigning in the world ? People say God puts his devotees to a series of tests. It seems God will be kind to us only when we enter our graves. Oh ! What can He do ? When He cannot punish the thieves that have stolen His jewels from His own house, how can He help us ?

(17) As Suresh passed through the street he felt like

entering the house of Narayana whose loud cough fell into his ears. For the past one week he was suffering from fever and cough. Surie came near the bamboo cot of his old master and said slowly : 'Uncle, how do you feel today ?' 'Surie, I feel much better. No anxiety about my health. Only the cough—it is battering my lungs. That is why I could not come to your house today to comfort your father. I have heard all. Jyothi has told me. The world has become a place for cruelty and vice.' 'It is the evil doing of some miscreant. It is over. Your cough is intense. Why don't you go to the hospital?' 'No use, Surie. I am using known drug. I am improved. If the condition is bad. I would have gone to Tirupati to consult some private doctor. Everywhere the Government Hospitals are like that, unless we meet the doctor at his house and give money, we can't help it. It is already noon, Surie, 'Take your food with me.

Jyothi was busy in the kitchen and came to them with a beaming face. Turning to Surie with inviting eyes, she spoke, 'So you are our guest. Don't be afraid of my preparations.' Again she entered the kitchen. After a few minutes their talk was interrupted by her voice, 'Father, my work is completed. Food is ready.'

Narayana got up from the cot and Surie followed

him. After washing their hands and feet they entered the kitchen room. It was spacious. Jyothi spread a mat for the two and they were seated. Narayana spoke to Surie, 'Don't feel shy, my boy. We are not strangers to you,' You have to eat to your stomach-full'.

A voice was heard, 'Ayya Narayya, we have work with you. Where are you' ? Narayana spoke from inside, 'Is it urgent ? I am sitting for my meal'. 'So you have not started taking food. Please come with me. The Sarpanch wants you urgently.' 'What is the matter ? What work has he with me' ? Jyothi replied, 'Probably the usual work—to write some promisory bond or to calculate the interest due to him. You can go after finishing your meal'. After some deliberation he rose, speaking, 'This man will be kept waiting. I will go now and soon I shall be back. Surie, you need not hesitate. Jyothi, serve food to Surie, You take care of him ; he may feel shy.' So saying he came out and followed the man who was waiting for him.

The young people felt a little delicate when the old man had left, their hearts overflowed with an inexpressible joy. For many weeks they could not meet although they lived in the same street. It is true, absence always endears people and brings their hearts closer, Their hearts throbbed with surging affection and their minds were

engulfed in the inundation of affection. They began communicating with their eyes though their lips could not utter. Their hearts in unison soared in an unearthly sphere of pure and serene love free from the mundane restrictions. The world lost its meaning for them ; everything else appeared to be trivial, futile and unreal. With a mild smile betwixt her tiny lips Jyothi gently broke the pleasant silence, 'Oh, what is it you are doing. You have not so far taken a single morsel. Your fingers are lightly tripping over the rice within the boundaries of the leaf without properly mixing it with the curry.'

As though a sudden jolt was given to his delicious dream, Surie, descending into this world felt the melodious impact of her warbling words. He answered in an incoherent way, 'Oh ! Yes ; it is a mistake. I...I...I don't know. I have forgotten myself.' Again meeting her eyes with his, heartily laughed and her sweet laughter united in his.

He at last finished his meal in spite of the diminished appetite. He received the glass of cool water from her dainty fingers ; he felt the crystal clear water reflecting her purity and serenity. He left the room, leaving her to complete her work in the kitchen.

Narayan returned feeling a little fatigue. The daughter

said, 'Almost an hour is over, father. It is too late. Please come and have your food.' 'What shall I do? Teacher's job in Samithi and Zilla Parishat schools has become wretched. We have to obey the words of all the political people including the Sarpanch. Such is the fate of the schools in the remote villages.'

(18) Alone in her well-furnished room, Sandhya, though seated on a cushion sofa turning the pages of a Telugu Weekly, felt restless with her mind full of disturbed thoughts, confounding ideas and mazy misapprehensions. In the midst of wealth, almost sitting on the lap of prosperity, she was psychologically in an abjectly depressed state, which would frighten even a penury-stricken individual. Living in the midst of parents, she felt herself estranged absolutely lacking the natural parental love. She never had an iota of respect or fraternal feeling towards her brother Nagaraju, a sordid specimen of depravity and beastiality never making any overt gesture to respect the laudable qualities of his worthy sister. Although they lived in the same spacious house under a common roof, they were more or less birds of different species taking shelter at sun-set in their nests of the same large tree.

She left her room and came downstairs. Seeing the daughter Rukmini said, 'You have come in time Sandhya.

Sit with me and in a couple of minutes coffee will be ready. At times you are indifferent and forgetful. What is the matter ?' 'Nothing, mother. Why, I am alright. I am as I used to be. Where is my father ?' 'How are we, the female members, expected to know about the movements of the men ? He left the house in the morning. He said he was going to Tirupati on court work. For the midday meal also he did not come.' 'I thought he is in the field. Has anyone gone to look to the fields ?' 'No. Gangulu has gone to Srigiri to fetch manures.' Many weeks before you went to the fields. After having coffee, why can't you walk to the fields ? It will refresh you.' 'Surely, mother. I will go. I can breathe fresh air. How long shall I stay within the closed walls of the room ?'

After taking coffee, she left the house. As she came out, her eyes automatically fell on the opposite house with a searching look. Deeply sighing, she slowly walked covering the shoulders with the loose end of her sari. Her mind traced fast into the past. How many times had she walked that way talking and laughing with her intimate friend Santhi ! How odd and terrible is this life ?

The loss of her bosom friend was a great shock from which so far she was not fully recovered. Till now she was full of suspicions and apprehensions regarding

her friend's sudden end ; still she was uncertain. As she walked she felt her friend walking with her in an invisible way ; soon she realized the folly of her imagination.

Gradually her thoughts rested on Surie, whose indelible memory had filled her mind. All the members of her family had wronged Surie having unjustly developed boundless aversion to him. They were angry with him as he did not care for them and they felt it was an unpardonable offence. But Surie was right ; he was plain-spoken and straight-forward in his word and deed. Sandhya felt deep respect for him and he was the object of her adoration. The status, largely determined by material prosperity in the society always stood between them as a huge hurdle, which she never cared for. Here and there in the fields sugarcane gardens were seen in their lush growth. They looked like huge rough emeralds studded on an old spacious statue stupidly mutilated by hostile religious fanatics.

Nature around had a peculiar charm, when golden rays of the sun mildly touched the ground. Sandhya looking at this feeble sun just above the western hills was very much captivated by the beauty of nature. Clad in her plain yellow cotton sari, her fair complexion looked fairer as the golden rays of the setting sun warmly caressed her.

After sitting there for a while she felt the loneliness of the place and its quiet surroundings. The sinking sun who had been solitary companion, had reluctantly descended behind the western hills. Most of the cow-herds had already left the plot driving their cattle home. At a short distance she beheld the figure of a man coming in long strides towards her. As the figure approached her face beamed with a flush of ineffable joy, for he was the young man whom she adored most. With a little shyness she addressed him almost in an inaudible voice, that was choked with her pent-up feelings : 'Oh, it is you Surie. I must thank God for giving this rare chance of meeting you.' 'Truly, Sandhya, it is a providential meeting I have not thought, even in the least, that you will come to the fields that too, alone. It is already dusk.'

'All on a sudden I took a fancy to come here and so I walked at once. When there are people like you, there is no place for unnecessary fears. Is it not true, Surie? Why...what has happened to you? The colour in your face is changing. You are not what you used to be.'

'No, no, Sandhya. I am what I am. You are still inexperienced and innocent. The person on whom you pin your faith may after all turn to be not a trustworthy man. We

can't believe any one. We live in the midst of wolves and wild beasts.' 'Your words sound strange. You speak as a grey-haired philosopher and not as a bouyant young man. What a change is there in you ?' With a smile stretching to the uttermost limits of vacuum, he replied, 'When a man becomes weak and ineffectual, automatically he becomes a philosopher. When he can't fall back on any other thing, he has to take the support of philosophy. The bright countenance of Sandhya had already become dim and his distant words of detachment began gnawing her tender heart which resulted in the moistening of her eyes. Without her own knowledge tears trickled down her pale cheeks. It so moved the stander-by that he came close to her and as if by instinct, touching her slender shoulder with his left hand gently wiped her tears with his right fingers. With the support of his strong fingers under her artistic chin she, slightly raising her head met his eyes with hers, blurred by tears. Slowly he whispered, 'Sandhya, you are really an angel. I am unworthy of you. As long as I breathe in the world, I can never forget you. You do not know my mental agony. Yet we are creatures of circumstances. Please let not a tear drop from your eyes. I can't endure it. I want to see you smile and live happily. Our lives have become two poles of a magnet. They can never

meet 'Surie, is this your decision ? What wrong have I done to you ? It is true many wrongs are done to you by my family. My father is a heartless man and so is my brother. But am I responsible for this ? Tell me. Surie. Am I to be deprived of marrying a man of my choice for their sins ? ...Oh ! how terrible it is ! I am a sinner. For the sin of being a member of that house.' Then she said

'I should share the divine wrath and taste the bitterness. Does not the cot receive the severe blows on account of giving shelter to the bugs ?' Let not a curse fall on your celestial self. Yet we are ill-fated and star-crossed.' 'I am the more fortunate for I am the idol in the sacred shrine of your heart. Yet I am the most unfortunate because I am destined to be aloof from my favourite goddess. Sandhya, do you know what I am ! I am just a huge peepal tree ready to be blasted by the violent gusts of wintry winds. That is why I have decided not to encourage you. I only wish that you should understand me.' 'Yes. I understand you perfectly. You are determined not to understand my sentiments. You do not know a woman's heart. A woman showers her love on only one man in her life,'

'Oh...Sandhya I feel the echo of my inner voice which implores me not to mar your life. It is only for your sake,

I struggle to speak. You will grasp the truth of my words one day or other.'

Sandhya lost control on her spirits which she till then with incredible strength had checked. She felt terribly weak even to stand on her legs, her strength failed and she slowly sagged to the ground. Resting her heavy head on her raised knees she pressed her brow with her feeble fingers. All her pent up emotion all on a sudden violently released itself and in spite of her efforts a low stifled moan came. It was almost dark. Her pretty hair glistened with the drops of tears that fell from the eyes of her precious friends, with whose support she stood up. She broke the terrible silence. 'Let us go, Surie. I pray the God to soften your flinty heart in due course of time. I wish you all joy.' Farewell, my dear Sandhya. Even the sight of us walking together may create volcanoes in the malicious minds of this rotten village.'

With these words Suresh parted company with her and went in the opposite way through his field, which seemed to be mocking at his dejection.

Sandhya with a sinking heart and sagging strength plodded her way homewards. No sooner did she reach the house than she flew to her room upstairs and collapsed on the bed. The pillow on which her fair face had thrust it-

self soon became wet with the flow of her tears. Rukmini came to her room and said : 'What is it Sandhya, have you forgotten to come downstairs and have your meal ? All the others have finished ' Coming near her daughter and observing her closely she exclaimed, 'Why, you look so dejected and out of your spirits. Are you not feeling well ?' In an indifferent tone the daughter said, 'Mother, tonight I can't take rice. I am not well. Terrible head-ache. Kindly leave me here to my self. Don't disturb me.'

Listening to her relatively harsh words, her mother left the room and the daughter fell on the bed burying her pensive head on the pillow.

(19) Early in the wintry mornings the domestic activities in the houses of the village went on as usual. Especially from the second fortnight of that month upto the sacred festival of the Sankaranthi—the month generally known as Dhanurmas—the village folk spend the early morning hour upto the sun-rise in bhajan in the temple of Sri Rama located in the centre of the street. Every day a house comes forward to offer and distribute the 'prasadam' for the devotees there. That day it was the turn of Rudraiah, who was second to none in publicly proclaiming his respect for the God and his generosity in sending a huge plate filled with a large quantity of the sweet rice prepared

of rice, jaggery, ghee, dried grapes, cashew nuts, spices etc. The chillness of the rural air was dispelled by the loud warm songs of the God. The voice of the old people, the noise of the urchins and the clanging of the instruments gave rise to a confused sound, which was dinning into the ears of the people.

In that shivering cold Rudraiah, lying on the bed in his room, spoke to Gangulu who sat on the floor like a faithful dog. Rudraiah said, 'Ae Gangu, do as I say. Don't apply your muddy brain. You fool, you have a huge body, but no brain. After careful thinking I have planned it all.' 'Yes, yes. I will do as you say.' 'You don't understand how much heart-burning is there in me for that beggar.' This young cur has become a mote in my eye, standing as a stumbling block in my way. In three months or so, Panchayet elections come off. In all my life I had no rival. This time if he is allowed to breathe on the earth, he becomes a hurdle to me. The sooner we clear him the better.' 'Ayyah, last evening I had met the other fellow. I told him what you had instructed me. In two occasions in the past he was my accomplice.'

The voice of Rudraiah's wife came from inside : 'Don't you go to the temple ? The prasadam is ready.' He answered, 'Only for that I got up so early this morning.'

Sending Gangu after repeatedly cautioning him, he got himself ready in a few minutes.

Just at that time from the opposite house Suresh had come out and after stepping into the street he looked at the face of the man coming from the opposite direction. He immediately retraced his steps into his house cursing his inauspicious moment ; 'A bad day for me ! No sooner had I got up from my sleep than I had to see the satanic face of this wicked rogue. I don't know what kind of calamity would befall me. See the deceitful way in which he is sitting in the temple, reciting the sacred name of the Lord Govinda. Oh ! woe to the God ! God's name has fallen on evil tongues and on evil days !' Seeing the son coming back, the mother inquired, 'What has happened to you, son ?' 'I have come back, mother, because I saw the sinister face of an owl. I will go in ten minutes.' 'It is strange to hear such words from you. Once you used to laugh at us when we spoke about good or ill omens.' 'Life is a great teacher, mother. Every rebuff we encounter sharpens the edge of experience '

After a few minutes he got up, took the spade from his mother and set off to the field. Already the gentle rays of the rising sun fell on his body. Ramayya took the spade from his son and said, 'Surie, you pull out those bushy

plants and weeds. I will cut the edges., 'If it does not rain in time, even this money which we would spend now turns to be a waste.' 'No ; we should not think like that. One who trusts land is never ruined.'

Surie, removing his shirt and placing it in one corner began pulling out the useless plants, which were more of a hindrance for tilling. After doing the work for half an hour, he felt the fatigue. The son looked in his father an image of unfailing hope, inexhaustible energy and firm faith in the mother earth. After some time the two hired ploughs had come. These two farmers who belonged to the same village and one of whom was Venkiah entered the land, harnessed their bulls and tied the ploughs to the centre of the yoke and started tilling.

Ramayya, whose heart was touched with the sad remembrance of his pair of bulls, for a while totally oblivious of the present surroundings lived in the past recollecting the happy moments he used to spend with his bulls. He was painfully aware of the unavoidable present, held the spade in his firm right fist and resumed his toilsome work. They talked casually about the poor condition of farmer's life, land-lord and money-lenders' exploitation and the caste system. Ramayya, standing up, said, 'It is all our Karma. We have to curse our fate.' Surie emotionally spoke, 'We

are in a state of limbo. The rich take care of themselves. The so-called low-born people are zealously taken care of by the government, of course, for various reasons. The starving so-called high born have none but the devil to take care of. Hell with the caste structure !'

After having taken their food brought by Parvathi, they washed their hands and faces, and resumed their work. Ramayya, taking a lengthy fibre tied a bundle of dry sticks, collected by Surie. He lifted it to his wife, who carrying it on her head went back to her house.

The work was going on in a smooth way. The two ploughmen sincerely ploughed the land, while Surie picked out all the dry sticks and placed them near the boundary of the plot. His father was slowly cutting the edge to a slight degree so that the green grass came out with its roots. He was carefully cutting the edge, because the land on the other side of the boundary belonged to Rudraiah. The rectangular piece of his land was surrounded on all the three sides by Rudraiah's vast stretch of land.

Surie saw at a distance the uncouth figure of Gangulu coming that way, who in the recent days never ventured to go near the presence of the former. Surprisingly that day Gangulu came there in long strides with a hote of defiance in his looks. All eyes turned to him when Gangu's meta-

llic tone resounded : 'Is there any justice, Ramayya, in your work ? You are crossing the boundary. We won't allow it ' Ramayya, coming to an erect posture, slowly answered, 'Why do you shout like that, Gangu ?' There you see the survey stone indicating the extent. Leaving out a part of my land for people to walk, I am cutting the edges, now you are bawling out without either meaning or justice.' Gangu, who came very near, snatching the spade from the old man, ranted with burning eyes, 'You old fool, how many guts have you to challenge my words ? Oh, you think that ass of your son is a big hero who would protect you.' Turning to the ploughmen he roared, 'unharness your oxen and drive away the bulls to your homes or I will break your legs.' While he snatched the spade from the old man and pushed him violently, Ramayya lost his grip and fell down on the hard furrow.

No sooner had Surie seen his beloved father falling down, than he flew to the spot with the speed of a lightning. Gangu, who had expected just this was ready to strike Surie with the spade. The moment Surie stood there at an arm's length to catch hold of the spade, the latter with all his vengeful force tried to knock the enemy by aiming with the spade. Instinctively the young man moved his head and it was providentially a hair-breadth escape

from death. The next moment Surie caught hold of the right wrist of Gangulu and struck on his face violently with his fist. For a while both struggled for the possession of the instrument and in his rising fury Surie kicked on the latter's thigh. Gangu gradually lost his grip on the spade and it fell on the ground and Surie threw it on the other end of the field. Gangu desperately attempted to have his firm grip on the young man's throat. In their desperate struggle both fell down on the ground. Gangu who lay flat, pushed the young man and managed to stand erect. Even before he struck his foe, the latter had battered his face and nose from which blood began flowing swiftly. Unable to resist the assailing enemy, Gangu showed his back and took to his heels. In the abrupt act of running away, his foot slipped and he fell headlong into the puddled field full of cowdung with a thumping sound. When he got up he seemed to be a nocturnal disguise for the riotous festival of Ganga Jaathara.¹

The work went on as usual and just before noon they went away. At the time of their midday meal, Ramayya sitting by his son said slowly in the way of an advice,

1. An annual festival, merry and riotous, celebrated in every village and town alike in Andhra with pomp, pagentry, drum music and disguise.

'Surie, let us not intensify our quarrel with Rudraiah and his henchman. People may laugh and curse him from behind, but in his presence no one has the boldness to speak against him.' 'Father, do you mean to say that even when our self-respect is put to shame we should keep quiet. If he is wealthy, his wealth will be in his house. If he is arrogant we should teach him to behave properly.' 'Better to be away from the rich and cruel man than to go near him and pick up troubles, The wicked man is like a venomous serpent. Though he is wrong, he can purchase justice. Suppose we are dragged to the court of law, even the people who see his crime would not open their lips.' The mother also added, 'Surie, why should we involve in troubles with the monster? Let us live so calmly that our existence is not noticed by anyone. You are our only hope. When you get a job then we can leave this place and be away from these wild beasts.'

Surie, inspite of his hot blood, heaved a deep sigh of dejection, in the midst of his silence. After Having finished his meal, he stretched his wearied body on the cot. Resting his head on a pillow and looking blankly at the thatched roof, he reflected: 'The conditions in the poor villages may never be bettered. The princes have gone and the princely privileges too. But in one form or other they

continue. At the village level such odious worms have become petty-princes without a trace of princely nobility. Freedom has become a meaningless word. Justice ! It is a thing of the other world and not of the earth. Here it is a common commodity which can be bought. Money alone counts in this world and it gives respectability. Equality is an inept word and stranger in the land. Everything is caste-oriented. Merit is no factor.'

His reflections had an abrupt end when the old master Narayana entered. Ramayya, waking up from his nap, said, 'Come and sit here, Narayana. Living in the same street, we did not meet for a week.' 'No rest for this life. Immediately after school hours I come back home and stay in the house. Jyothi has to be alone if I go out. She is afraid of loneliness. Hey, Surie, what are you doing ?' Surie promptly replied, 'I am thinking of the futility of this life. What is the use of my having certificates showing highest marks ? What is the use of my merit and academic record .' 'Don't feel so depressed. As a young man you should face the troubles boldly. I heard about your encounter with Gangu. It is unpleasant. Discreetly avoid such things.' 'It has become a fight on all sides. We are surrounded by vultures within and without this tiny sphere.' 'Don't get disheartened. Ultimately it is the good that

prevails. What do our epics say ? The MAHABHARATHA ends with the victory of the virtue.' Trying to divert the attention, he asked, 'Surie, how is your present work ? To how many boys are you giving tuition in Srigiri ?' 'At present to ten boys. Tenth class students. It is really a blessing in disguise, uncle. In a few days the number may increase to fifteen or even twenty, without that our survival would have been hard. Oh, it is already 4 P.M. I must be there in an hour.' His father said, 'Surie, look at the sky. It is cloudy. Oh, the thunder.....it is deafening. Any moment it may rain. You are regularly going everyday. They will not mistake you on account of threatening clouds.' Narayya also pleaded, 'Listen to your father's words, Surie. He is correct.' The son, nodding his head with a beam of smile, answered, 'Father, you need not fear. If it rains cats and dogs, I can take shelter near the samadhis in the burial ground on the way. So I go.' Seeing the son reaching the outer door near the street the mother called her in a tone of uncertainty, 'Surie, my boy, come before dark. It may heavily rain. Moreover it is not good to come in the burial ground after dark.'

Waving his hand, he replied laughingly, 'No fear,, Amma. I am not a child. I will come back a little early.'

Both the parents looked in an anxiety at the receding figure of their son, who had walked fast in long strides. Narayana having spoken words of encouragement went to his house.

(20) The chill and eerie evening with light showers of intermittent rain swiftly receded into the vast background of the enveloping darkness. The illimitable curtain of the devilishly dark clouds had completely muffled the sky and not a single star among the legions dared to glance at the nocturnal activities through the pitchy column. Except the dinning sound of the reverberating thunder and the fury of the wind, nothing was audible, and except in the moments blinding lightning nothing was visible. All on a sudden the electric lights in the houses, in the streets and everywhere were off. Probably the heavy winds blowing with high velocity have damaged the electric wires. The sight of stray people walking with umbrellas in the rain also became scarce, owing to the frightening nigritude. Gradually the fall of rain intensified and it rained in torrents. It looked somewhat strange to the people because generally towards the end of December cold would be severe and the fall of rains would be less. It appeared as though it was the result of some depression in Bay of Bengal. All on a sudden the crashing sound of an uprooted

tree pierced the sable night. It was a huge banyan tree seen for more than three generations.

Suresh, having finished his duty of giving tuition to the school-boys, came out of his friend's house and stood in the open verandah anxiously awaiting the temporary cessation of the rain. Passing of every minute seemed dreadfully tedious, Ramesh his friend and class-mate came from inside and said, 'Why don't sit down Surie ? Let us be seated on these chairs See the terrible rain, I hope for the next summer there may not be scarcity of water.' 'For those people, who have wells, no problem of water, But what do you say about the majority who can't afford to dig wells ! Now, if the rain doesn't cease how should I go home ? My parents will be waiting in anxiety. It is already 8 O'clock. It is the sound of the siren.' 'But in this rain how can you go ? You are not in a stranger's house. Please stay here for this night.' 'Let me see for another half an hour. If it stops, I can go home in twenty minutes the distance is nothing.' 'How are you able to spend all the time in the village, Surie ? Is it not tedious ?' 'Why do you speak on such a topic ? You see now a days life in the village is not only tedious, it is vicious too. It has become deplorable They always think about their neighbours and think deeply and devilishly about the ways

and means to ruin them. Both men and women are like that. Women indulge in gossip, concoct fantastic rumours, and feel supremely happy. Majority are scandal mongers, leading a narrow life and living like frogs in the well. Village becomes a separate world by itself with its petty-mindedness, absurd politics, jealousies, lust and any amount of ill-will. Hostilities continue for generations. Ramesh, in a way, you townspeople are relatively fortunate. You mind your own work and you think of your own problems.' 'Your description is uncharitable, Surie. We are disgusted with the constant din and bustle of the town life here. Village is the place for peace and tranquility and wealth of nature.'

'Of course. Nature in and around the village is always enchanting. But what is wrong with the village is not the nature, but its human nature, i. e., the crooked mentality of its people. The senseless stress on caste and wealth is more so with the so-called educated lot. It is an unpleasant topic, Ramesh.'

Both kept quiet for some time looking at the drops of rain. The intensity of the rain had lessened and thinned, Rising from his seat, Surie said to his friend, 'The rain is almost stopped. Now I think I can go without any hesitation. If I stay for some more minutes, it may rain

again. My mother would be anxiously waiting and she would not have touched the food.' Stepping into the dark street, when the water flowed, he again said, 'Practically the rain has stopped. Good night Ramesh. If all goes well, tomorrow we shall meet. Good night.'

Surie walked fast tearing the total darkness with his sharp penetrating eyes. Water had stagnated in the tiny pits. On both sides of the road the culverts overflowed with rain water. Along with the sound of the speedily flowing water the incessant croaking of the frogs was strikingly heard with its peculiar charm. He crossed the outskirts of Srigiri and came half the way where the burial ground on both sides of the road across the wide river was awfully visible. There was not a trace of human life on the lengthy road and death-like silence had reigned the area. Silence in such a dark stormy night seemed to be terrible. The presence of a cemetery in the dark deserted river trebled the sombre gravity of the frightening silence and made him reflective. He thought, 'Why should anyone be afraid of the burial ground and the samadhis? What can the corpses do? If there is anything which we should be afraid of, it is the living man. Today we are living people with minds overcrowded with ideas and plans; but we do not know what happens to us tomorrow. Noble

men and heartless v'lains were all given an equal burial here. Now they are reduced to a handful of broken bones or they have become a part of the dust. What they are now, we have to be tomorrow. Difference of time is the only truth. Great sages realized it, and great poets expressed it in chaste and charming language. How beautifully did Pothana express this great truth in his immortal Telegu poem :

'Where are the potent kings of the past
And their precious things and treasures vast ?
All their pride, glory and lust have come to dust
And when death summons obey we must.'

With these ideas vibrating in his mind Suresh crossed the river and reached the huge mango groves. Every tree seemed to be an evil supernatural spirit or a dark devil in disguise.

There was the constant pattering sound of the drops of water falling from the clusters of mango leaves on leaves beneath them. Some tiny boughs, broken by the strong winds, had fallen on the road and Surie walked carefully pushing them aside. Every alternate minute peals

-
1. an immortal Telegu classical poet of early 15th century, whose Bhagavatham has no equal in its profundity of thought and spontaneity of expression.

of thunder pierced into his ears. Rain started slowly drizzling, as if it had resumed its work after a dreadful dilemma. He failed to find the way and distinguish the path from the thorny bushes. As he was about to set his foot, he saw in the sudden brilliance of the lightning a crawling snake across his way. Instinctively he jumped over and escaped the mortal bite. For a moment he felt as though his heart had suddenly stopped and slowly it commenced functioning. He thought about his helpless parents who had pinned all their hopes in his supposed bright future and their life depended on his. He was not afraid of death ; but he was afraid of the terrible poverty of his parents. He walked speedily and recklessly, lest the drizzling rain should intensify.

He reached the end of the curve, whence the road was straight. There was a small bridge across the road to let the water flow from one side to the other of that narrow canal. In the midst of the loud thunder, he felt as though he heard a human sound in its lowest ebb. He stopped and turned his head to all directions ; he failed to hear or see any. He laughed to himself at the slight trace of fear working in his mind. He felt himself terribly hungry as he had not taken even his midday meal with a disturbed mind. The mere thought of hunger made him bring before his mind's eye

the comforting picture of his affectionate mother waiting Argus-eyed for him at the threshold of the house to serve him rice. He quickened his pace wiping the drops of rain on his face with his hand.

In that moment there was a thunder so loud that it seemed as though it was the terrible sound of the crash of a part of the universe. Every living person would have felt its fearful reverberation in the tremulous beating of the heart. Surie, for a moment, was so overpowered with its sound that he felt as if it had cleft his body in twain. His ears were deafened and his eyelids were instinctively sealed. Suddenly chillness had crept into his body. Before his eyes could see a human form standing close to him in that blinding lightning, a heavy blow with a stick in all its force had fallen on his head and the terrible breaking sound of the blow was drowned in the universal sound of the thunder. His head reeled, his eyes whirled, his hands trembled and his feet staggered. With a desperate vengeful attempt he struggled to clasp the opposite man laying his hands on the stout throat of the heartless rival. Before the grip tightened another crashing blow with a stout bamboo stick had fallen on his neck.

His grip loosened, his eyes ceased to see, everything in the world seemed to be fast fading away, and his strong

body collapsed on the wet uneven ground. As he fell, he struggled to utter in a feeble fading voice, 'Amma, amma, am.....' The faint articulation stopped, the lips failed to move, the tongue hardened, while the stream of blood flowed across his mouth. The faint beating of the feeble heart ceased, the body became stiff and cold.

(21) A month after the burial of Suresh, he was almost forgotten by most of the people. His most unfortunate parents, looking definitely older and weaker, were grief incarnate. They became supremely indifferent to the dire needs like hunger.

Life lost its savour, existence missed its meaning; every moment they invited death, but death was afraid of touching their senile bodies.

Ramayya and his wife, drowned in the sea of sorrow, did not even come into the street and they had forgotten about their field and the existence itself.

Sometime after midday Narayan came to their house and seeing both the couple lying separately in two corners on the hard floor of the tiny house, he spoke to them, 'How long can both of you weep like this? will the boy come back alive on seeing your endless sorrow? With these words of consolation, Parvathi's pent up grief broke its barriers and she wept loudly. Amid her choking grief;

she managed to speak, 'Brother, for whom should we live ? Why should we breathe on this earth ? Hey Easwar¹ , does this horrid fun satisfy your whim ? Of course, for one who had relished the swallowed poison, this is nothing.' 'Sister, I know the depth of your sorrow. Do you think I am normal ? No, no I had built my fond hopes on him regarding the future of my daughter. But all is brought to naught. It is all our Karma." Ramayya said, 'True, it is our Karma. My life is blighted with a heavy curse. We are born only to suffer.' The sooner we are taken away from this wicked world, the better for us. For whose sake should we breathe and bear the burden' ? 'What shall I say Rama ? I am not bold enough to give any empty advice. If you starve like this, you will wither away soon. Suicide is an unpardonable sin. By voluntarily famishing ourselves, we will be punishing the Aatma in us. We should wish peaceful end to our lives.'

'It is true. What else can we do, except filling our stomachs with words.' Wiping his tears which were peeping through his blurred eyes, he spoke again with a forced feeling of resignation, 'What has happened to our complaint, Naraya ? Have the police made any inquiry ?' 'Since a month I have been going to them everyday. Till now no

1. the supreme God, are of the Hindu Trinity.

progress is made. In spite of the fact that we have given the names of the suspects no action is taken. It is said that some one close to Rudraiah had, strongly instructed this Inspector not to proceed in the matter. They have money, men and power.' Narayan left as the time to attend the school in the afternoon had approached.

Gradually the aged couple, endeavoured to draw meagre sustenance from philosophy. Ramayya consoled his wife, bringing illustrious analogies from the great epic THE MAHABHARATA. He explained, 'When our sorrow for the death of two children is so profound, what should be the nature of the sorrow of the great Raja Dhritarashtra who survived the tragic end of all his one hundred sons? How can any great poet express the heart-rending sorrow of the great royal mother Gandhari?' He came close to her, tenderly touched her dishevelled hair and their two aged heads conversed in a mute language that filled their hearts with serene love, unflinching faith, endless forbearance and divine resignation.

It became an established fact that no action had been taken against the suspects and the case was practically abandoned owing to the lack of witnesses. Rudraiah became very bold in resuming his reign of terror, both overtly and covertly. Gangulu succeeded in securing a special

niche in the heart of the heartless master with whose wife he frequently indulged in secret dalliance and commanding the people in an authoritative tone brooking neither opposition nor resistance. Nagaraju's voluptuous pleasures and nocturnal activities went on without any restraint. Sandhya the silently suffering lady became alienated to peace and happiness.

The evening of the following day, Ramayya and his wife, who had gone to the field after many days, slowly walked homewards, the former bearing on his head a bundle of dry wood and the latter a bundle of green grass. By their side, their cow followed them with unshaken faith, fidelity. The cow with her similar loss followed them and whose pure affection was her only talisman.

Still at a considerable distance from the village, while walking on the bank of the river Kalyani, Ramayya was surprised to find at the odd time of the sun-set many a vulture hovering over a dry and denuded tree. When the old couple came near the withered tree, they looked at the repulsive sight of the carcass of a calf torn into pieces and swallowed by about half a dozen vultures. The calf was no other than the lean and lanky offspring of their faithful cow. The calf had been missing since last night. The vultures supremely indifferent to the persons passing by

their side, were wholly absorbed in assiduously applying their claws and beaks to the odious offal.

The old couple entered the village and opposite to them in the centre of the street there stood the small sacred remp'e of Sri Ram and His divine consort Sita. They looked at the temple and pitying the helplessness of the Heavenly pair who had been reduced to ineffectual idols, slowly entered their humble habitation giving the impression as though the ancient celestial couple Parvathi and Parameswar with their proverbial poverty had entered their airy abode.

Death-like silence reigned the village, almost all the people had fallen asleep. In the dark street there was no trace of human life. All sounds had died save the rustling of the leaves swayed mildly by the chill winds blowing from the nearby northern hills. Occasionally the gravity of the quiet night was disturbed by the whining of the dogs. Amid the frightful silence of the night, occasionally disturbed by the horrid hooting of an owl, came the low vibrant voice of Narayan :

'Paritranaya sadhunam Vinasayacha dushkreetham
Dharma samsthapanarthaya Sambhavami yuge yuge'¹

Santih

Santih

Santih

1, The most famous Sanskrit sloka (stanza) usually quoted from the

GITA :—

परित्रणाय साधूनां विनाशाय च दुष्कृतां ।

धर्मसंस्थापनार्थाय संभवामि युगे युगे ॥

THE END

